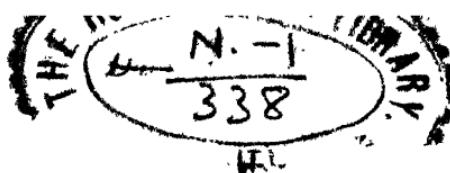


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THE HOUSE OF CHANCE

SOME PRESS OPINIONS OF “THE PRICE.”

“As a careful and critical study of a selfish and frivolous woman, and as a lively and dramatic story, ‘The Price’ is a book that counts.”—*Pall Mall Gazette*.

“Is a semi-society tale with occasional touches of shrewdness and wit. The swindle about the second wife is new and rather clever, and on the whole more probable than it first appears; the author has steered carefully clear of melodrama in regard to it.”—*Evening Standard*.

“The idea of the present story is quite excellent, and would have lent itself admirably to her own peculiarly racy and light-hearted style. A slight alteration in the plot, and there need have been no tragedy at all. For all that, Mrs. Wentworth-James’ admirers will like the story.”—*Globe*.

“The idea of the story is distinctly clever. Geraldine, in spite of her many imperfections, is a very human and sympathetic figure, and the two men—the straightforward, matter-of-fact husband and the daring, impetuous aviator—are finely contrasted. There is some really fine writing, descriptive of the flights that Geraldine and her lover make on his aeroplane, and the intensely dramatic climax to the story is as thrilling as it is unexpected.”—*Sunday Times*.

“Mrs. Gertie de S. Wentworth-James has the honour of being probably the first to make an airman villain—or does she regard him as the hero?—of her novel, ‘The Price.’ She has a power and a purity as a writer, which lifts her far above the average lady novelist, and makes her book enjoyable.”—*Nottingham Guardian*.

“Of course, it is interesting and real. Everything that Mrs. James writes is that, and it is as up to date as it well can be. This is, I believe, the first novel to deal with flying machines and men, and right well has Mrs. James performed her task. The story is ingenious in its plot, is well told, grips you at the start and holds you tight till you have finished with it and it has finished with you. By all means read it.”—*Pelican*.

THE HOUSE OF CHANCE

BY
GERTIE DE S. WENTWORTH-JAMES

AUTHOR OF
“PINK PURITY,” “WHITE WISDOM,” “THE LESSON,”
“THE PRICE,” ETC., ETC.

‘ Five little white mice of Chance,
Shirts of wool and corduroy pants,
Gold and silver, copper and tin,
All for you if you let me come in—
Into the wonderful House of Chance.’

—(OLD RHYME).



LONDON
G. BELL & SONS, LTD.,

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PART I

"Chances, as they are now called, I regard as guidances, and even, if rightly understood, commands, which, as far as I have read history, the best and sincerest men think providential."—RUSKIN.

"Lily-like, white as snow,
She hardly knew
She was a woman, so
Sweetly she grew."—OSCAR WILDE.

CHAPTER I

IN AN HOTEL BEDROOM

THE satin bedspread was of pale rose pink, 'to match' the curtains, carpets, and general scheme of upholstery, & the silk lace-trimmed nightdress was of sky-blue—that incontestable sky blue which may be seen round Putney on Boat-Race day, and decorating the starched white gowns of happy Hampstead holiday-makers on the first Monday in August—to match the extraordinarily innocent eyes of its-wearer ; and the bunch of curls lying on the dressing-table was tinted dull delicate primrose-yellow to match a few strands of soft hair straying across a much-frilled linen pillow-case marked with the monogram of the Hotel Magnifique, Château du Leys, Normandy.

The matching and harmonising and contrasting all produced as effective a colour-scheme as one would wish or expect to find off the posters of some new, much-advertised patent enamel.

For some moments the symphony in tints remained motionless as a well-rehearsed *tableau vivant*, then suddenly the placid pink surface of the quilt was disturbed, while the frilled pillow was bereft of its dull primrose-yellow decoration.

Cecile Clare Kissler had sat up in bed and unstopped the speaking tube fixed on a small table at her right.

"Apportez le chocolat et les lettres—numero vingt-deux—s'il vous plaît," she said, evidencing the fact that primitive French spoken with an American accent could contrive to be quite a musical and melodious performance.

Yes, it was quite time to wake up now—to wake up and discover what facts the post had to deliver, what fables the American journals had transferred into facts, and what rumours the English penny newspapers had to circulate with that inspiring dulness which always accompanies a taste for conscientious caution.

To-day's mail ought to be interesting, seeing that yesterday's mail created no mental stir whatever. For the post, like everything else which matters, is governed by the universal rule of fluctuation.

If on Tuesday you receive an offer of marriage, two dinner-parties and three dance invitations, a request from some Bond Street photographer to include you in his fashionable beauty series, and a solicitor's intimation that you have been left a five-figured legacy, be sure that Wednesday's post will bring no stamped or registered thrill greater than a circular from a new automatic pianola company, a modiste's regret that your new gown can't be finished in time for the occasion for which it was ordered, and a printed intimation that one of your club subscriptions is overdue.

And now that Cecile Clare Kissler had actually ordered the chocolate and the letters she waited with

the petulant impatience of a rich and beautiful young woman who unconsciously feels justified in believing that the speed of the world's revolutions should be governed solely by her own personal desires, with the result that by the time a smirking *femme-de-chambre*, foaming chocolate, featherweight rolls, golden butter, four letters, five small packages, and six papers put in an appearance transatlantic ill-humour was more or less to the fore.

"*Bon jour, mademoiselle!*" said the *femme-de-chambre* as she laid the tray across Miss Kissler's knees.

"Good morning," replied Miss Kissler, letting loose her petulance by means of an English response to a Gallic greeting.

Marie crossed to the huge window and drew back four heavily weighted pink silk curtains.

"*Ze weather—beauti-ful—sun—shine!*" she observed, displaying a courteous desire to fall in with the American beauty's linguistic mood of the moment.

"*Oui, il fait beau temps!*" answered Miss Kissler, breaking a roll with such vicious determination that the tray jerked and the chocolate almost splashed.

Miss Kissler made a fierce but *sotto voce* observation and the *femme-de chambre* hurried out of the room. She was a wise *femme-de-chambre*, who knew that super-liberal *douceurs* were just as often earned by going away when she wasn't wanted as by putting in an immediate appearance when her presence was desired.

The art of getting out of the way is a cult in which every person should make him or herself perfect. No business or social asset is more important.

When, after eating the crumb and frowning at the

crust, Miss Kissler had finished with the hot roll, she drank two cups of chocolate (her mouth looked like a little unopened tulip as she put it against the rim of the cup), pushed away the tray, and then proceeded to devote herself to her correspondence.

Three of the four letters were apparently only of sufficient interest and importance to merit a rapidly-skimming survey; but when she opened the last of the quartette—enclosed in a large business-like envelope addressed in a small business-like handwriting—Miss Kissler became absorbed.

“Darling of mine”!—certainly that was a pretty commencement, and some of the petulance left the American girl’s face as she read the closely-written impassioned lines which followed.

Yes, he made love on paper almost as perfectly as he made love in person, which is a great achievement in these days, when petrol and propellers and wires and transmitters have hustled pen-and-ink sentiment to the wall—and Cecile found it sweet to read and sweet to remember, and sweet to—to—

No, no, she didn’t; she couldn’t find it sweet to look forward when looking forward meant nothing but upset plans and stunted triumphs.

“Tschush!”

It was almost an unspellable little ejaculation, but sometimes Miss Kissler gave vent to it when she was quite by herself and without any one to witness her impatience. In public she never exhibited any impatience—it didn’t accord with her seraphic blue eyes and generally “bébé” demeanour.

“Tschush-h-h-h!” and after repeating and pro-

longing the exclamation Cecile stuffed the charming love-letter under her pillow and turned her attention to the packages.

A free sample pot (half-guinea size) of a new American dentifrice ; a small charm in the form of a black enamel cat with emerald eyes and a diamond collar (this re-directed by the grimy hand of a London stage-door keeper) ; a box of amazing sweets ; a satin-lined case of astounding perfume ; and a bundle of proofs from a new West-end photographer who had recently gained an enormous vogue on account of his subtle skill in dealing with sitters' double chins. There was scarcely a fashionable double chin in London which Mr. Ferdinand Blythe had not touched up into a sharp and definite jaw-bone !

Cecile looked at the proofs of her own portrait and felt more or less satisfied.

In one she looked like a saint, in another like an inspired baby, in another like some pure-souled young Psyche waiting for her Eros's kiss, and in another—well, in the large full-faced vignette she looked just a normal very pretty girl with a secret ache at her heart.

" Guess that's a bit too ordinary ! " she murmured to herself before once more sinking back upon the great frilled and monogrammed pillow with a sigh.

It was annoying to look "ordinary" even in one single photograph, though "Cecile Clare" had more than once come to the conclusion that the "ordinary"-average commonplace woman gets through life with infinitely little trouble to herself and every one connected with her.

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Blazing moments and flaming situations may be all very well, but sometimes they burn up the heart's sweetest field-flowers, leaving nothing but an oasis of disillusionment behind.

Cecile Clare Kissler had not yet turned twenty, but in spite of her immature womanhood nearly all the moments of her life had blazed from the very beginning. It had been excitement and triumph and conniving and kisses all the way; and now—now that a perfect furnace of experiences lay ahead, the golden flames must be all put out!

It was maddening—it was infuriating!

She had been a fool, an emotional, impulsive fool, and there seemed no way out of the difficulty!

Cecile Clare stared straight ahead at the stretch of sunlit sea visible from the huge pink-curtained windows—a serious expressionless stare which had always counted as one of her most piquant attractions—and continued staring steadily until a knock sounded on the door.

"Come in," she drawled—at which permission a white-faced, black-haired, black-eyed woman entered the room.

"Say, it's half after ten already. Aren't you somewhere near thinking of getting up?" observed Miss Kray, who having divorced a husband in Dakota had preferred once again to adopt the vestal prefix. For while the average Englishwoman over thirty-five will do anything to lodge a "Mrs." in front of her name, the correspondingly-placed American woman will adopt every expedient to get rid of it. The reason may be that America, unlike England, does not insist upon

regarding spinsterhood as a matter of necessity. It admits that its "miss" may be a "miss" because she prefers to be a "miss"!

"Yes, I'm somewhere near it, but I'm not there yet," replied Cecile Clare, turning her beautiful expressionless stare away from the sea to rest it on the pallid but curiously attractive face of her companion. For Pauline Kray was one of those ugly women who come over the Atlantic with a dozen passports in their possession—the passports of tact, of discretion, of undiscoverable insincerity, of intrigue, of the faculty for flattering as people want to be flattered, of wit, of wisdom, and of a smartness that tops nearly every other variety of personal attraction.

The ugly American usually possesses all the elements requisite for a professional beauty.

"You're not making a speciality of cheerfulness this morning, I can see!" was Miss Kray's next observation, as she began stuffing the disorder of the morning's mail into a satin-lined wastepaper basket.

"I don't see the use of being cheerful when every day only brings me nearer to the end of everything," answered Cecile Clare without animation.

Miss Kray glanced at the large business-like envelope addressed in the small business-like handwriting and understood.

"Any plans made?" she enquired, with a movement in the direction of the envelope.

"Six pages of them!" replied Cecile Clare.

Pauline laughed a laugh which showed all her teeth and made her look like a Medici heroine. Cecile continued to stare.

" Well, out of six pages something ought to be all right ! "

" Nothing is all right. Go away, Pauline, I wish to get up."

Like all Cecile Kissler's decisions, this one was sudden, but it was definite, so Miss Kray at once moved towards the door.

" Shall I take the papers and get them opened by the time you come down ? "

" Yes, you might do that ; " and without another second's delay Cecile threw aside the bedclothes and put her two wonderfully white little feet upon the floor while she stood plump and young and blue-nightgowned in a splash of yellow sunlight.

Pauline Kray left the room and Cecile Clare Kissler began to dress.

CHAPTER II

A PORTRAIT—AND AN INSPIRATION

To the front of the Hotel Magnifique, Château du Leys, Normandy, stretched the turbulent, ill-regulated Channel, which, however, on this particular August morning was blue, motionless, and mysterious as her far-away Southern Oceanic rival. Behind the hotel rose a second and higher level of grass-covered chalk cliff, with a thickly-wooded valley for its background. To the right stretched out the broad bay and stone pier of a semi-smart holiday resort, to the left were to be seen thick green masses of foliage clustering round the châlets of Leys—the “Châlet Primrose,” “Châlet Rosabelle,” the Villas “Alexandre,” “Leon,” and a dozen others of either modern interest or historic note.

The view was almost a perfect one; the freshness and salt and sweetness of the ozone-laden air were superb, and the tender lapping of little lazy waves made music that was among nature's most inspired melodies.

But to Cecile Clare Kissler standing on the outjutting stone plateau the scene was without any romantic or picturesque significance. She might have been gazing on Battery Park on a rainy day or Southend Parade

for all the enthusiasm with which she regarded one of Normandy's most picturesque samples of scenery. For nothing pleases the eye when the mind is unable to conjure up any sort of solution to the danger problem on hand.

" Ah ! good morning, Miss Kissler, have you been out long ? " sounded a smooth, gentle voice at Cecile's elbow.

Cecile turned round and smiled seraphically. It was worth while smiling seraphically at an old lady who was an earl's daughter and a K.C.B. baronet's widow.

" Ah, good morning, Lady Margaret. No, I've not been out more than an hour," replied the resourceful young American, who less than twenty-five minutes previously had stepped into her bath.

" You must find it a delightful rest here after all the rush and excitement of your professional life, I should think " continued the old lady, who had it in her power to be one of the most useful women in London.

" Well, I guess I'm quieter in London than I am here. Of course, I'm at the theatre every night ; but then I always go right home to bed directly afterwards, and don't get up till eleven or twelve the next day. The dances and drives here are real excitements for me," answered Cecile simply and ingenuously.

The old lady's heart expanded and warmed. It was beautiful that such a sweet, modest little blossom of unsophisticated goodness should be growing among all the flaunting flowers of the stage.

" I suppose, my dear " (it was the first time Lady Margaret Effam had so far unbent to an hotel acquaint-

ance), "I—er—suppose your life is very thickly set with temptations, is it not?"

Cecile looked puzzled, as if an entirely new view of an entirely new situation had just been presented to her.

"Well, now you say that, I suppose it would be; but I never look at it in that light," she answered reflectively. "But"—here her little softly tinted face dimpled with smiles for a moment—"I'm afraid I'm rather a difficult proposition to deal with in that way, because I—I don't like young men!"

Lady Margaret laughed delightedly. This pretty candid little American girl went straight into her motherly but expansive heart.

"And why is that, dear child?"

"Oh! I don't know—they seem silly, and don't help my mind to get any bigger. I always like older people—they are wiser and more experienced, and can teach me things. I've got several very good friends, but they're all older ladies, or older gentlemen, with daughters of their own, and I can talk to them like I used to talk to poppa and momma before I left home. Several gentlemen have very kindly asked me to take supper with them, but I always say, 'No, thank you, I've got my bread-and-milk waiting at home,' and then that makes them quiet, and they never ask me again! Besides, I don't care for going out—I don't care for anything except to study hard—hard—hard—and to go home one day to poppa and momma and hear I've improved!"

Lady Margaret was truly touched, and, after these and a few more admirable if somewhat prosy sentiments had been expressed and commended, Cecile

Clare descended a flight of stone steps and made for a small arbour set beneath the level of the terrace.

Here she found Pauline Kray seated in front of a rustic table, on which were spread out the proofs of Cecile's own portraits and one of the English illustrated papers which had arrived by the morning's mail.

"Lady Margaret Effam came full stride into me on the Plateau, and I guess I've been making a good impression!" she said, in the peculiar sing-song voice that helped to carry out many of the various illusions which Miss Kissler set up before the world of credulous and influential old ladies.

"Oh!—er—oh!" replied Pauline Kray, who appeared to be absorbed with something that required a certain amount of close inspection.

"Yes, I talked poppa and momma, and bread-and-milk, and no suppers, and no young men, till I shouldn't wonder if she was to ask me right to Effam Castle for the purpose of teaching her three granddaughters the way to grow up nicely!"

This time Pauline Kray didn't answer at all, so without raising her soft little thin voice much above its usual sing-song level, Miss Kissler amused herself by rehearsing the song with which she had for so long reckoned and hoped to make a hit.

Quite still she stood, a demure, plump little figure in white linen, with a dangerously-simple Paris hat covering one eye and nearly all the primrose yellow plaits, which on this occasion were tied with a black bow just above her neck.

She looked the very essence of modern musical comedy transplanted to a Normandy village.

‘ Oh ! my, aren’t I spry ?
Don’t I look a dear little maid ?
Aren’t I coy ? Aren’t I shy ?
Oh ! stars ! aren’t I cunning and staid ?
If I try, I can cry
Till all—’

“ Say, Cecile Clare Kissler ! ”

The sudden interruption came from her companion-chaperon, and when Cecile brought her impromptu rehearsal to a sudden halt it was to turn round and find the faintest possible flush of excitement visible on Pauline Kray’s pallid cheeks.

“ Yes ? ” drawled Cecile.

“ What would you say— ” Pauline spoke very deliberately and impressively—“ what would you say if I’d found a possible way out of your present difficulty ? ”

Never for one second had Cecile let go of her fascinating imperturbability, and the present instance was no exception to the rule.

“ I should say—dollars ! ” she answered concisely. Pauline understood.

“ Then look here ! ” She drew Cecile towards her—towards the table on which the proofs and an open illustrated paper were outspread. “ Look at *this* ” (she pointed to the vignette full-face portrait)—“ look at *that* ! ” (she pointed to a page of the ladies’ paper) “ and now see if the very most cunning thing in ideas doesn’t suggest itself ! ”

Cecile looked, then held her emotions very tightly in check.

“ I guess you’ve got it ! Yes, I guess you’ve got it ! ” was the only answer she made.

CHAPTER III

IN THE CITY

THE London and New York Automatic Change Delivery Company's lift-boy was seated in the lift.

It was not yet nine o'clock, but Artemus usually preferred to arrive a quarter of an hour early, for the sole reason that it was more comfortable to sit in the lift and read his morning paper than to remain in the parental home on the other side of the river, where thirteen lusty-lunged brothers and sisters, ranging in age from seven months to fourteen years, rendered a calm perusal of the world's news more or less of an impossibility.

And the world's news was everything to Artemus. When he was reading his halfpenny daily paper he felt that his grimy knuckly hand was upon every section of humanity's great throbbing pulse. In turn, he felt himself to be a High Court Judge sentencing some poor, miserable, tempted fellow-creature to end his days with a rope tied round his neck ; a Home Secretary impervious to the assaults of militant suffragettes ; a great playwright who grew fatter and fatter on a diet of strained epigrams and effective silences ; a homicidal alien, an indeterminate Prime Minister,

South African millionaire with a deterring past, a divorced jockey, a field-marshal, an operatic tenor, or a knighted purveyor of currant buns.

Artemus's views were catholic, his interests universal, and his thirst for knowledge both pathetic and admirable.

Artemus was born to be a civic dignitary.

On this particular August morning, when Artemus had arrived even a few minutes earlier than the advanced quarter-of-an-hour, he was a scintillating K.C., Counsel for the Crown, a man who had risen by sheer force of splendid unscrupulous inhumanity, a man who tortured the weak and weakened the strong.

"Arch!" grunted Artemus, in a fervour of ecstatic admiration, while with bulging eyes and open mouth he read every sentence of a cross-examination which by sheer verbal cajolery must have the effect of securing a twenty-five years' sentence for a man of fifty-eight.

But before he could read luscious details concerning the prisoner's collapse in the dock a shrill feminine voice, wishing him a cheerful "good morning," caused the Change Delivery's lift-boy to realise that the business of earning his nine shillings per week had commenced.

However, there was no slothful unwillingness as Artemus folded up his paper—folded, it must be confessed, in such a fashion that the account of the prisoner's collapse remained uppermost—because the lift-boy approved of his firm, the directors and the managers, and thus approving was always pleased to serve their interests to the best of his ability.

"Good morning, Miss 'Oulton—another fine warm day we are going to 'ave!" he said, replying to the greeting of a young lady who wore a collarless blouse, and a small pearl ring.

This was one of the typists in the publicity department. Artemus didn't think much of her intellect; therefore she, in common with all others who didn't appeal to the lift-boy from the point of view of intelligence, was never treated to any conversational amenities on the subject of the weather.

Miss Moore (of the Borough Department) arrived next, and to her Artemus commented upon the "eaviness of the h'atmosphere," while Miss Jenkins (of the General Stock Department) was regaled with a brief *résumé* of Artemus's opinion concerning the overnight's sunset.

But when Miss Merrick (Miss Anna Merrick, the firm's most capable stenographer, who had just won an international speed contest at the Elysia Business Exhibition), stepped into the lift Artemus refrained from making any atmospherical comment whatever.

"I say, miss, 'ave you read Hennish Hennon's speech for the prosecution and the cross-examination of the prisoner?" he said confidentially.

"Yes, Artemus, I looked over part of it while I was at breakfast," replied Anna Merrick, in a voice that was singularly soft and level—the sort of voice that doesn't often penetrate so far East as Cornhill.

"A fine bit of rhetty-rick, wasn't it, miss?"

"Well, Artemus, I thought it was more bluff than eloquence."

"Did you now, miss?" Artemus had given one

reluctant pull to the iron rope, and slowly the lift began to ascend. "It didn't strike me in that way, but I daresay there's something in it. It was a good speech, though, and the percolation at the end fair took away your breath. It's them percolations, them rammings in at the jury at the end, that does the trick. When I'm in Parlement, miss, or sitting up on the Woolsack, it's working up to the finallys that I shall go in for ! I'll finish the bit over the page, miss, and we'll continue the discussion when you come down for lunch. Mind the step, miss ? "

Miss Merrick " minded the step " as she had been minding it every morning and afternoon—excepting Sundays and general holidays—for the last year-and-a-half of her life, and each time she put her foot across the brass-bound ridge the intolerable monotony of her existence seemed to grow more and more intense.

It wasn't that she was actually discontented, for discontent—as her late father had argued in more than one of his philosophical treatises—was merely a private or public acknowledgment of failure. It was only that she felt her mental, physical, and emotional inability to continue the routinal life which she had been living ever since the death of Dr. Eustace Merrick, M.A., F.R.P.S., etc., etc., put a fair-haired, well-born, well-bred, penniless young woman on the labour-market of the world.

But labour as labour in no way outraged Anna's scheme of an ideal existence. She had always been used to it, when—having learnt shorthand and type-writing in order to become her father's assistant and

secretary—long, long working days were spent over the transcribing of some big work which, alas ! always seemed to bring to its author the maximum of fame with the minimum of fortune. Work was invigorating, exhilarating, but it must be work which brought the worker in touch with even the lowest rung of that wonderful fame-ladder which rests on the earth and ends among the impenetrable clouds.

It's true that in winning the recent typewriting speed contest Anna had been the subject of a certain amount of congratulation and comment ; but because she happened to tap ivory fingerplates a shade more rapidly than they were tapped by some two or three hundred other young women Dr. Merrick's daughter did not feel that the goal of her vague desires had become even remotely visible.

And what was the goal of her desires ?

Anna did not know. Sometimes she had asked herself the question when, ceasing for a moment the eternal "click click" of her machine, she looked out of the window and down on the grey city streets below. But there came no concrete response to the query—only the dull, never-ending desire to do something which would bring her in touch with the colour and glory and beauty of the world—a world which, wherever it was, must lie west of Temple Bar !

When Anna had " minded the step " for the four hundred and ninetieth time of her life she passed down a curving stone passage—on each side of which were ground-glass windows and doors, black-lettered with the names of various departments and divisions—

and entered an oddly-shaped room, where Miss Houlton and Miss Moore and Miss Jenkins and Miss Ollett were playfully scrambling for supremacy over the looking-glass.

"Go away, dear! I shall tell Mr. Smeeth what a vain cat you are—and vain cats never make good travellers' wives!" cried Miss Ollett, giving Miss Moore a skilful shove into the stove.

"Travellers' wives have got nothing to do with *me*, my dear!" replied Miss Moore, with pretended unconcern and secret delight.

"No, but travellers have, haven't they? Travellers with dear little yellow moustaches that turn up at the corners, and pretty little curls just touching the tips of their ears!" broke in Miss Houlton jocosely.

Miss Moore opened her spacious mouth a shade wider than usual (no one had ever seen it entirely shut) for the purpose of making another coquettish response, but directly she became aware of Anna's entry the mouth closed partially and the response remained unspoken.

For quite unknowingly and quite unintentionally the presence of Dr. Merrick's daughter always put a damper on the too-exuberant spirits of her business colleagues. She didn't "put on side," she didn't "give herself airs"—it was only that her own lack of conviviality made them feel that it wasn't quite ladylike to be jolly.

And, above all, the Automatic Change Delivery's typists prided themselves upon being ladylike!

When Anna had taken off a large round flat black hat she smoothed her soft fair hair—which, unfluffed and

uncurled, was parted in the centre and drawn loosely over her ears, washed her hands, gave a little jerk to a shiny leather belt, which encircled an almost over-slim waist, and passed out, down the passage, and into the Publicity Department's working offices—*without* wrapping paper round her cuffs !

It was no use, she couldn't wrap paper round her cuffs. All the others might do it, every wise typist in the world might do it ; but she—she must be the one foolish exception who heedlessly and unjustifiably mounted up her washing bill all for the sake of pandering to an impeding artistic temperament.

When Anna had entered the Publicity clerk's office she sat down at her desk in the window and lifted the cover off a new machine which had been put at her disposal since the winning of an International Speed Contest invested her with a certain amount of official distinction.

But she didn't feel so friendly with this new machine as she had done with the old—with the old "Slip Lock" which had often jibbed and stuck, but jibbed and stuck as if it would say : "Anna Merrick, you and I shouldn't have anything to do with each other. We are good *confrères*, but I know well enough if things were set in order your small thin fingers would never tap my yellow keys ! "

Anna had liked the old machine for saying that, but now this burnished, smoothly-working new machine went straight ahead as if it thought itself quite as good as Anna and saw no reason why Anna should not go to the office every day and earn thirty shillings a week.

Some of the newer and more expensive makes of typewriters have no discrimination at all.

And so for the four hundred and ninetieth time Anna Merrick sat down to work while unborn dreams floated like thistledown wish balls through her brain.

CHAPTER IV

A PORTRAIT IN A PAPER

THE "jog" letters had all been sent out, the folders and branch envelopes had been addressed, three hundred advices had been dispatched, triplicate orders from the branches had been filed, and now it was time for lunch.

Anna washed her hands, put on the extraordinarily becoming flat black hat, and ran down four flights of stone steps—not from any discourteous inclination to avoid Artemus, but merely because her limbs were young and her heart was not so heavy as she believed it to be.

It is often like this—that human hearts are not nearly so heavy as their owners, with a certain mournful satisfaction, believe them to be. The heaviest heart will usually soar and rise in the skies of rapture if those weighty sandbags of human discontent can once be thrown overboard.

On leaving the huge Cornhill offices Anna made her way to a teashop in Gracechurch Street, where for six days out of the seven she lunched off coffee, poached eggs, and Swiss roll, eaten at a tiny table set in a remote corner of the upstairs dining-room.

But to-day a wild, reckless longing for fruit and cream—lots of fruit and lots of cream—assailed Anna's appetite (and Anna's purse); therefore, when the anæmic waitress slouched up to the table it was to receive an unaccustomed order from the fair-haired young lady who never forgot to leave a penny under the plate, and twopence on Saturdays.

"Strawberries and cream—and cakes—and lemonade to-day, please. It's too hot for anything else!" said Anna, in her usual soft and unexcitable voice.

The waitress giggled genially, looked as if there were something she wanted to say, went off, and after a few minutes returned with the order correctly carried out and a roll of paper under her arm.

"Er—er—" she began, when the fruit and cakes were spread out upon the marble table; "er—would you mind telling me if this is you? The cashier said it wasn't and I said it was, and we've bet each other a penny stamp about it. *This is what I mean!*"

Anna looked—looked at the fourth page of a week-old copy of *Woman's Sphere* (a threepenny weekly, entirely devoted to the writing up and illustrating of current feminine interests), and saw her own face looking out of the coffee-stained page.

It was a full-face vignette portrait that had been taken about six months ago, and the printed letter-press below ran as follows:—

"Miss Anna Merrick (of the Automatic Change Delivery's Company, Cornhill, E.C.), who won the International Typewriting Speed Contest at the Elysia Business Exhibition last week. Miss Merrick is the

daughter of the late Dr. Eustace Merrick, author of the famous work 'Subconscious Existence,' and other philosophical and scientific treatises."

Colour that was too vivid flooded Anna's face, and the lines about her young grave mouth grew hard.

"It *is* you, isn't it, miss?" repeated the waitress.

"Yes, it *is*," answered Anna shortly.

"Well, I *should* be proud if that was me! He! he!" and with a giggle that was intended to be genial and congratulatory the waitress stumped off on her rubber-tipped heels to fulfil a hungry but affluent clerk's imperious demand for steak and kidney pudding.

For some moments Anna stared at her serious pictured self, then she shut up the paper and threw it far away along the gay red plushette seat.

She was angry—she was angry with her young suburban landlady for doing what she hadn't any right to do. Because without any doubt it was Mrs. Smith who had sent that portrait to *Woman's Sphere*. Anna remembered now one of her unheeded remarks to the effect that now she (Anna) had "become a public character one of the ladies' papers ought to put her in!"

And Mrs. Smith had evidently sent up the portrait and they had "put her in"—they had "put in" the daughter of Dr. Eustace Merrick, M.A., F.R.P.S., and granddaughter of Sir Henry Hunt Merrick—as the winner of a typewriting speed contest!!

Anna hardly dared think all she wanted to think. It wasn't snobbery, it wasn't unjustifiable discontent, it was only she felt that grinding sense of passionate

revolt which grows like some spreading poisonous tree, when a woman realises the wasted qualities which lie within her.

— The matter was that she had never had a chance. No one—nothing—had ever opened wide the doors of that “wonderful House of Chance” so that she might enter and find the golden opportunities which lay stored within.

“ Five little white mice of Chance,
Shirts of wool and corduroy pants,
Gold and silver, copper and tin,
All for you if you let me come in—
Into the wonderful House of Chance.”

Inaudibly Anna repeated the quaint little rhyme which had been one of her childhood’s earliest remembrances, and as she did so a sudden strong, unreasoning, unreasonable hope shot up within her heart—shot up like a sweet sap-filled plant which *meant* to grow, no matter how baffling might be the surrounding soil and weather!

Surely one of those little white mice would scuttle forward and nibble at the bolts and bars till the door flew open and the secrets of the House of Chance were revealed.

Would it be the little white mice called Love, who would come to her rescue? or any of the other little white mice, called Fame, Hope, Push, or Beauty?

Anna did not know, Anna could not even conjecture, but without knowing or conjecturing she felt as she left the noisy, stifling teashop that things could not always go on as they were going on now.

One of the little white mice would nibble open the door.

Back through the narrow, baking city streets she went—streets full of rich men who toiled to get richer and poor men who toiled to live, with a sprinkling of girls and women who worked with that same uncomplaining patience which caused steaming, weary horses to draw overloaded carts through the scorching thoroughfares of E.C. London.

But something suddenly seemed to tell Anna Merrick that it wouldn't be always the city—not always the click of the typewriter and egg and coffee lunches eaten in a noisy, stifling teashop. It was as if the little white mouse called Hope had already begun to do his work.

When Anna reached Cornhill it was to find that upon reconsideration Artemus more or less agreed with her on the subject of the bullying K.C., and that the lift-boy's intelligent interest had transferred itself temporarily from the Criminal Courts to Buckingham Palace.

At the moment his manner of conveying her from the ground to the third floor was one of princely courtesy combined with kingly command.

"Oh! is that you, Miss Merrick?" called out Miss Houlton, as Anna passed into the dressing-room.

Anna gave the obvious information that it was.

"Oh! there's a letter for you—I put it on your desk."

Anna thanked her, once again took off the flat black hat, and then hurried into the office, where leaning up against the new indiscriminating typewriter was a large, thin, square envelope, across the top of which was printed "*Hotel Magnifique, Château du Leys, France.*"

Anna looked at it, wondered, and was just about to

tear the flap when a hard-faced young woman with steely eyes, and wearing an uncompromising linen collar, entered with the information that Mr. Pritchard wanted to speak to Miss Merrick in his office.

Mr. Pritchard was the publicity manager—a summons from him never carried any pleasurable portent.

"Thank you, I'll come at once," replied Anna calmly, as the letter from France was stuffed hurriedly into a little leather handbag containing a small handkerchief, a small purse, and a lamentably small sum of money.

CHAPTER V

A MAN WHO MEANT " TO GO FAR "

FOR the last twenty-four hours Lawson Rolt had been on the rush.

First of all it was the journey to the remote Yorkshire village, then a frenzied forage for every ghastly detail—true or untrue ; then the journey back to London, then the writing up of the " story," and now, at four minutes past five, he was free to do a little rushing on his own account.

So he rushed again—this time out of the huge building in which every day an issue of *The Morning Cry* was born, down to the Embankment, into Blackfriars Station, into a City-bound train, out at Monument, and then to the left down Gracechurch Street.

Once again he looked at his watch—a seven-and-sixpenny treasure which had only lost forty seconds in three years—and saw that for the next ten minutes at least there was no need to rush.

So he tried to slacken his pace, but slackened it with the uneasy air of a man whose very existence depends on his capacity for hurry.

It would be at least another ten minutes before she came out, and when she did come out he would meet

her and tell her about his promotion and ask her to marry him.

• He was tired of boarding-houses, where meals were served with relentless punctuality whenever he happened to come in late and at least half-an-hour after time when he was disposed to be punctual ; and he was tired of " rooms " in the houses of landladies who shared his whisky and doled him out a somewhat illiberal proportion of his own tea.

Besides, he wanted some one to love him (that is to say, when " stunts " and " stories " left him any leisure to be loved) ; some one to mend his socks, and some one to listen without interruption while he talked about himself and his own journalistic triumphs.

And the some one who seemed best fitted to fulfil all these requirements was the girl he had come to meet and waylay as she left the offices in Cornhill.

Lawson wondered if she would be surprised. Probably not, because ever since that day when he called to interview the manager of the Publicity Department, and was, instead, handed over to one of the lady stenographers who had been instructed to supply all required information, his intentions had been more or less obvious.

He had chased her whenever there was any time for chasing anything or anybody—he had written to her—he had sent her copies of the issues in which any of his own specially thrilling " stunts " appeared—he had presented her with tickets which the man who did the minor theatres and concerts couldn't use—he had taken her to the Coliseum and the Hippodrome " on the nod "—and he had more than once given her arm

a convulsive squeeze when guiding her across crowded thoroughfares.

Oh, yes, she probably guessed what was coming ; and—there she was, dressed in dark blue linen, with a flat black hat upon her head, a Peter Pan collar round her slim white throat, and a shiny black belt round her little waist.

She had never looked prettier, and never had Lawson Rolt been more keenly anxious to impress upon her what a brilliant and resourceful journalist he was.

He went forward with the resolute, assured air of a man whose daily bread is gained by a blessed capacity for disregarding snubs, and raised a dark felt hat dented in the middle.

“ How do you do ? ” he said, speaking with a certain impressive slowness, in which he indulged occasionally when there was not a train to be caught or a printer waiting for “ copy.”

“ All right—thanks ! ” answered Anna Merrick ; “ at least,” she added with a bitter broken little laugh, “ as all right as I can be after making a mistake that will cost the firm five pounds’ worth of time and paper, and being suitably reprimanded by the manager ! ”

“ What a shame ! Did the beast bully you ? ”

“ He wouldn’t call it bullying—he’d only call it looking after the interests of the firm ! ”

Lawson laughed—men always laugh where a woman doesn’t intend them to laugh—and walked by her side as she crossed the road and turned down Gracechurch Street.

“ Have you been very busy lately ? ” enquired Anna politely.

"'Busy' doesn't describe it!" he answered. "I've got—by Jove, I've got the biggest scoop of the year! You know the Flinton Vale murder?" (Anna shook her head. Artemus hadn't posted her up in this particular crime.) "Yes, yes, you do—the parson's wife whose mutilated body was found in the middle of a burning haystack. Well, I saw the haystack, got a farm girl to dress up like the murdered woman and to get into the middle of another haystack—then I took a snapshot without showing any face. Morris Lee on the *Evening Lyre* had wanted to get that picture, but while he was waiting I got it! A great scoop—great."

Anna nodded visibly and shuddered inwardly. She felt no actual dislike towards this pushing young man with the keen, almost super-intelligent face, and agile, alert figure; but there were times when his casual businesslike acceptance of the tragic and gruesome filled her with unconquerable disgust.

"Well, good-bye—I'm going to the Station here. You, I expect, are starting off in search of something else very dreadful and wonderful, aren't you?" she said, halting when they reached the Monument Station.

"Yes, I'm starting off in search of something very wonderful, but not at all dreadful," replied Lawson, smiling appreciatively at his own smartness. "And I'm going on my search in a taxi" (here he raised a silver-mounted stick, in response to which a passing motor-cab whirled and halted) "—and you, Miss Anna, are coming with me while I search!"

"No—er—er—I—" But Anna's protestations were feeble—feeble partly because her comprehension

of signs and portents was temporarily dulled, and partly because the idea of scudding along above ground was preferable to swaying and shaking along underground.

She didn't say any more, and two minutes later they were seated side by side and passing all the tired pedestrians tramping forward to catch their evening trains.

"This is very nice of you—but very extravagant," said Anna, smiling prettily. It was almost the first time she had smiled that day, which had been a particularly horrid and depressing one.

"Extravagance doesn't matter to-day, Anna," he replied, bending forward so that he could see her face, and let her see his, while they talked.

She made a delicate little movement with her two fair eyebrows. That sudden use of her Christian name was an impertinence.

But to a young man who had hidden behind bushes in order to dart out and positively thieve an interview from a retiring president the swift movement of a girl's eyebrows was not likely to act as a damper upon fervour and volubility.

"No, Anna, extravagance doesn't matter to-day," he went on expansively, "because when a man's been promoted from the outside staff to the inside staff things are inclined to wear a slightly different financial aspect!"

"Oh, it's like that, is it? How nice! I *do* congratulate you!" cried Anna cordially.

"Yes, Sir Lionel came to me to-day, and banged his big hand on my shoulder and said: 'You're the man

we want, Rolt!—you'll go far, my dear fellow! The *Morning Cry* needs you—you must take a big place on the *Morning Cry* if we want to see our circulation doubled. I told him it was very nice of him, and all that sort of thing, and that I would take a big place on the *Morning Cry* if there was a big financial inducement. So he made the inducement big enough, and there I am—able not only to keep myself in bread and jam but to keep a wife as well!"

"Oh!—yes—er—that's splendid, isn't it?"

"I suppose it is—yes!" He was still looking at her—looking at her earnestly and seriously, as a man does look when he suddenly finds himself more thoroughly in love than he at first believed himself to be. Then his rather red thin hand with unbeautiful, inelegant nails closed over hers. There was only a shabby kid glove to protect her soft cool flesh from the hard warmth of his palm.

"Anna, you'll marry me, won't you, little darling?" (Heavens! he was much, much more in love than he at all imagined—than it seemed at all possible for a tearing, rushing, scoop-seeking journalist to be!) "We'll be so happy in a dear little flat, and when I'm proprietor of the great Liberal paper that's running in my head you'll be Lady Rolt—that's what you'll be before many years have passed, Anna, and I think" (he was pompous here, and a cad) "you'll find that better than tapping away the rest of your life at thirty bob a-week!"

Anna smiled inanely—which was all she was required to do just at so delicate a moment—and didn't say anything at all.

Lawson was quite right, it would be pleasanter—almost anything would be pleasanter than a never-ending series of days like to-day had been.

But she didn't want to marry him—oh, she didn't—she *didn't*!

His face was too penetrating and cute—that trick of pushing forward his head like a dog in search of a trail was unprepossessing. His hands, even when they were clean and cool, could never suggest that idea of artistic laziness which a man's idle hands should always be able to suggest; his hair was sleek in the wrong way, and made sleek with the wrong stuff out of a bottle; his eyes were too quick and comprehending; his laugh was too candidly and unrestrainedly amused; his collar, when it was high at all, was too high; his boots—his ears—his voice—his self-appreciation—his professional callousness—his—his—

"We'll get it all fixed up and be settled in our flat before a month's over, won't we, darling?" she heard him say, with buoyant certainty in his voice.

"But I—I'm not sure it would be a success," she answered feebly.

"Well, if one of us is sure, that's all that matters!" Here Lawson laughed and showed all his teeth except two on either side of the bottom. Anna looked away.

"You can't be sure—" (she didn't want actually to refuse, for this might be the little white mouse called Love who had come to nibble open the door of Chance!—but oh! she didn't want to accept!) "—you can't be sure when we know so little about each other!"

"I know all that's necessary to know, dear—and that is that in less than a month you will be Mrs. Rolt, living in a decent little flat, and that in less than ten years you will be Lady Rolt, living in Mayfair! I mean to go far, Anna—I mean to go very far!"

CHAPTER VI

A MENTAL "QUICK-CHANGE"

THE taxi stopped in front of No. 10, Church Terrace, Parsons Green, in the small garden of which stood a stout young woman spraying a couple of depressed-looking rose trees with quassia chip solution.

"Hullo, Anna!" was her greeting, as her "paying guest" alighted and opened the creaking iron gate. "Good evening, Mr. Rolt!" she added, when Lawson had paid the fare and was following Anna up the short stretch of broken tessellated pavement which divided the front door from the gate.

Anna made no response as she passed straight through the hall into the sitting-room, but Mr. Rolt paused to exchange a few cheery remarks and to laugh heartily, to show an expansive row of top and bottom teeth.

"Well, Mrs. Smith, all I can say is I shouldn't like to be a poor harmless little green fly trying to get on in the world!" was his final sally before joining Anna in the small parlour with the oval table in the centre, and the framed portraits of Mr. Smith on either side of the twenty-five shilling "walnut" overmantel.

Anna was standing with her face to the window, and he glanced at her with almost passionate eagerness before shutting the door. For the door must be

tightly shut, no matter how insistently a nailed-on piece of rubber tubing might cause an inclination to burst open again.

But it was quite, quite shut now—and Lawson Rolt regarded himself as being engaged to marry Anna Merrick !

He was engaged to marry, and being engaged to marry her he might kiss her on the lips ! Heavens ! it would be wonderful to kiss Anna ! He had never really thought about it till this moment ; but now that by bending his head sideways towards the piano he could see her lips, the idea filled him with a sudden overwhelming passion and desire.

He was no longer a pushing, thick-skinned young man with no thought beyond ugly connivings and experiences necessary for the "scooping-in" of a "scoop" : he was just a lover, but without that innate idealism and refinement which robs passion of its grossness and possession of its brutality.

She was his—she belonged to him—he would kiss her !

So without a word he sprang forward, and, as she stood with her back towards him, put both arms about her shoulders, leant across her shoulder, and found her lips.

For a moment Anna remained motionless. She had been unprepared, she had not expected their vague conversation to bring about instantaneously amorous results ; but a second later she had realised the hatefulness of being kissed by an unloved man, and so realising exercised all her resistance to end the embrace.

But though she had succeeded in bringing the hard, hot, crushing kiss to an end Lawson Rolt's arms still held her in a grip of possession.

"Why is the little girl being a little tiger-cat?" he murmured half jocularly, yet with the strength of a suddenly awakened but very intense passion still darkening the hazel pupils of his swiftly-gazing, shrewdly-narrowing eyes.

"I—don't—know!"

She gave the answer dully and a little hopelessly. Why *was* she being a tiger-cat when this man's kiss might be the first prize offered by the House of Chance?

She looked up into his face and found it weather-beaten, hard, and, although a young man's face, creased in places with the heavy ruts of age. His nose too—not ill-shaped—was red—yes, it was red verging into a promise of purple near the tip. Anna thought about beer and shuddered. His eyes were all right in their way, but quick, jerky, comprehending glances made them all wrong; and his mouth was without any humanity or gentleness.

Yet, in spite of all these drawbacks and others, which the critical cruelty of feminine analysis would surely discover later on, this man who held her in his arms and told her to kiss him offered the only possibility of escape from—the City!

It was to be Lawson Rolt or—the City!

It must be uncongenial wifehood or—the City!

If only there could be some other way out! If only one of those other little white mice would—

"*Crash!*"

Only quite a small crash it was, caused by the falling

of Anna's little black leather handbag from the table—against which Lawson had suddenly leaned—to the floor.

"Oh, the clasp is broken!" she cried, pointing to the bag which was lying open on the ground. It was quite possible that the clasp might not be broken, but the observation and the incident both served in the putting off of a kiss which it would be hard to give.

Lawson stopped to pick up the bag, and as he did so a lamentably empty little purse and a square crushed envelope dropped on to the carpet.

"What's—what's this?" he demanded, in stern tones of mock jealousy.

"Ah! of course—of course!" Anna seized the envelope from him and her blue eyes grew big and round. "This came for me to-day, but only just as Mr. Pritchard was sending for me, so I forgot to open it. I must see whom it's from and what it's about."

"Very well, I'll allow you five minutes of the time that is my time—*my* time, remember, Miss Anna Merrick!—and then I shall expect two kisses instead of one because I've been kept waiting!" And having pronounced this ultimatum the lover once more became the journalist as Lawson turned to the window and watched a nursemaid who was leaning out of an opposite window with a baby in her arms.

Now supposing that nursemaid were to drop that baby at this very moment and then commit suicide by leaping out herself, there would be ten shillings, or possibly a guinea, made on the spot. Train to the Temple—taxi to the office—"story" written up—and

the price of a pair of boots earned without any trouble.

But pieces of luck like that weren't picked up very easily. Of course there was that memorable evening when he (Lawson) was being motored down to Ilbinstborough to get new particulars about the Norwegian doctor who was reported to dissect abducted victims in the garage. They had been skimming over the ground when, lying in the very centre of the road, was a girl—gagged and bound and unconscious—while her father's butler and housekeeper were burrowing their way through a hedge.

That had been a tremendous double scoop, but it wasn't often that marketable "stunts" dropped like ripe plums in a September gale and—

At this point of his reflection, however, Lawson again remembered that he was a lover, and, moreover, a lover who was waiting to be kissed !

More than five minutes had elapsed—there had been time for the future Lady Rolt to read her letter half-a-dozen times.

"Now, dear little darling, time's up !" he cried, turning boisterously towards her.

But there was not to be any kiss—in a second he knew there was not to be any kiss.

Her eyes were shining like two great turquoisees which had been suddenly granted the sparkle of diamonds, her lips were parted as though there were some song she yearned to sing ; and the letter—the letter from Château du Leys—was crushed against her bosom. The attitude was a dramatic one, but being unconsciously dramatic was not absurd.

"Kiss me, Anna—kiss me!" But as he commanded he knew he would not be obeyed.

"I can't—I can't!" she answered, stepping backward. "I can't kiss you because I can't marry you! I know I ought to have said so definitely before. I am very sorry—but it is impossible—I can't marry you because I—I am going away!"

CHAPTER VII

“ PUSH ALONG, MA HONEY, PUSH ALONG ! ”

THERE was a silence after Anna had spoken, while Lawson Rolt's face grew extraordinarily ugly—ugly with the cruel ugliness of a man whose heart is very much cramped and whose head is very much swelled.

He wasn't appreciated, and a certain type of man is very nasty to deal with when he's not appreciated.

“ Oh ! dear, dear, dear, what a slap in the face for L. R. ! ” he said, and the remark was followed by a laugh—a laugh which caused his head to be thrown back and all his teeth (except two on either side at the top and bottom) to become visible.

“ Oh ! I don't think it's much of a slap in the face. You didn't mean what you said—you said it just for the sake of being nice and kind to me when you knew I was down ! ” answered Anna, using the inherently tactful woman's ruse for preventing a man from feeling small.

Lawson glanced at her shrewdly from beneath the dark, overthick eyebrows which almost met above his nose.

This tact would work all very well with “ the average fool ” (Lawson classed almost every man who wasn't

a rushing, tearing journalist as an "average fool"), but it wouldn't go down with an individual whose business it was to understand Humanity a great deal better than Humanity understood itself.

"Yes, I'm a nice kind boy, aren't I?—a dear, pretty little boy, useful to lead about on a bit of string?" he said, still keeping up the same safe vein of bitter jocularity.

But Anna didn't notice either the bitterness or the jocularity now. She only wanted to get rid of him, to get rid of him so that she might be alone with the letter from Normandy.

And he knew, the shrewd young man with the "nose for news," knew quite well that the girl with whom he had actually found time to fall in love wanted to get rid of him!

The knowledge made him unwisely insolent.

"So the *Monsieur* or the *Comte* has come up to the scratch, has he, and Miss Anna Merrick is going to become a Parisian *mondaine* instead of a lady typist at thirty bob a week? Is that right, *madame*?" he enquired, making strange jerky gestures which were intended to convey an impression of don't-care insouciance and ridicule.

Anna looked at him calmly and sternly, then went across to the door.

"Good evening, Mr. Rolt!" she said, before leaving him alone with all the ferment of a common man's hatred seething at his heart. For there is no class of individual—no stiletto-armed Spaniard, no fire-eyed Italian—who can hate with such dangerous intensity as a common underbred Englishman. He ranks among

those poisonous human serpents which are the most difficult to kill.

But Anna—after momentarily regretting that she had almost behaved badly, and deciding that at some time or other it might be only kind to drop a line, or anyhow a picture postcard—had no more room in her heart for thoughts of Lawson Rolt. She was so thoroughly taken up with her own affairs—with the extraordinary turn in the tide of her own affairs.

She was so intensely excited, she felt that bursting breathless excitement which renders the compression of waist-bands and collar-bands almost insupportable. Surely liberated prisoners must feel like this when on the morning of their release they watch the great gates open and once more see the full limits of the free man's sky !

Anna was liberated, Anna would be free from the prison walls of a great business house in Cornhill !

There was no doubt about it ; there were no half possibilities and reasonable hopes—just a definable certainty—if she spent the banknotes that were crinkling and clicking in her hand, and if she followed the directions contained in the pencilled letter written on a plain sheet of foreign notepaper.

She must read it again—she must go on reading it again and again until a train steamed out of a station and a boat cut its way through fluffy green and white waves.

" If your eyes are blue and your hair is light (as one would imagine it to be by your portrait appearing in *Woman's Sphere*), and if you are able to do a little singing, you can make more money and get more fun than by winning typewriting speed contests. Therefore, if you wish to make money in a very pleasant and harmless fashion,

come right away to 'Chateau Blanche, Le Vallon Vert, Verneval, Normandy,' and wait just there until a lady calls around to see you. Enclosed is a sum of money sufficient for your journey, hotel bills, etc. If you decide to come catch the ten o'clock train at Victoria Station next Tuesday, cross via Newhaven and Dieppe, and take a diligence from Dieppe to Verneval. The lady will probably call on the evening of your arrival or the morning of the next day. You will be quite safe and happy if you come right along, and it'll be just one of those big pities if you don't. This is one of those satin-lined chances that shouldn't be lost ! "

That was all—not an address, not an initial—nothing to guarantee anything except the four crinkling banknotes.

But—(here Anna turned on a tap of more or less sound philosophy)—if there was any one ready to trust a stranger sufficiently to send four banknotes without a guarantee that person must be more or less trustworthy him or herself. For lack of trust is often engendered by the knowledge of personal unworthiness, when a man measures the world by the standard of his own morality or the lack of it.

" Anna—Anna, aren't you coming down to supper ? " came the sound of Mrs. Smith's voice from the passage below.

Anna put the banknotes and letter into the envelope and went down at once.

" I have seen the portrait in *Woman's Sphere*," was the first remark she made on entering the small back room, where a supper mainly composed of cold things bought ready cooked was set out upon the table.

Mrs. Smith sniggered and stood in an attitude of gentle defiance—that is to say, with all the parts of her body which should bulge being made flat, and all the parts which should set flat bulging.

" Well, what about it ? " she grinned.

"I was very angry with you this morning; but, although there is no reason to be less angry with *you*; I am not angry now," answered Anna buoyantly.

"Ah! it's brought Mr. Rolt on, hasn't it? I knew it had directly I saw you come up together in the taxi-cab. Why didn't you ask him to stay for supper?—we could have sent round for a bit more ham."

"I wasn't thinking of Mr. Rolt—or supper—or ham. I was thinking of *this*!" replied Anna, as she threw across the envelope from Château du Leys.

Mrs. Smith examined it, took out the enclosures, and read.

Then came the shrewd, ready, common sense of a woman unhampered by any super-acute intelligence or any flights of artistic fancy.

"Well, of course you can't go—it's one of those traps that have been shown up lately," she said, sitting down in front of the sliced spiced beef.

"Oh! no, it isn't," replied Anna, suddenly stretching her arms high above her head, as if already the cramped environment of her present-day existence had been removed.

"Of course it is, Anna—we'll ask George when he comes in. Goodness! I don't know what might happen to you if you went—you mustn't go on any account!" Of course Anna mustn't go. It was Mrs. Smith's duty to prevent her going, particularly as it was through Mrs. Smith's despatching of the photo the whole incident had arisen. Besides, Anna paid eighteen shillings a week for her room and "partial board!"

" Well, whatever's going to happen must happen. I'm going ! " answered Anna gently.

For this time the House of Chance was really opening wide its doors, and it is when these doors are thrown open and people feel afraid to cross the threshold that the grey dreariness of human nature settles down into a permanent tragedy.

The advice which the old Southern nigger gave his mare is advice for us all to take—" Push along, ma honey, push along ! "

Yes, we must all " push along " when there is admittance to be gained into the House of Chance !

CHAPTER VIII

A CHANNEL—CROSSED !

“ NEWHAVEN ! Newhaven ! ”

The train had stopped, porters were calling out, and passengers with a dislike to paying registration fees were staggering beneath mountains of hand-baggage and wishing they had never left home. For never does home seem more desirable and more worthy to be spelt with the Anglo-Indian capital “ H ” than when the traveller is struggling to convey hand-baggage from a train to a boat without the expenditure of unlimited tips. The capacity for tipping alone makes any journey outside the limits of the District Railway worth the taking.

But Anna didn’t wish she had never left home—for one reason because it was over two years since she had had any home to leave ; and for another she was, on this one and only occasion of her life, able to tip as liberally and often as the fancy seized her.

So she paid eighteenpence to the stout man who carried her small dressing-bag and rug on to the boat, a shilling to the thin man who got her a deck chair, threepence to a depressed-looking man who tried to get her a deck chair but couldn’t, sixpence to a cheery

little boy who after selling her a twopenny cake of chocolate couldn't find any change, and a florin to a brown-cheeked man who gave an expert nautical opinion on the weather.

And as she spent her shillings and her sixpences with the lavish recklessness of a person who has plenty more shillings and sixpences to spend when those are gone Anna experienced a sensation of most acute rapture, of almost arrogant triumph, such as only comes to the hard-up woman when she suddenly finds herself in a position to leave off counting the pennies.

She feels herself to be a queen as she splashes a shilling here and carelessly refuses the change because "coppers get in the way"; she knows herself to be an empress when she hurls a sixpence there and nods lightly to indicate that "it's all right"!

And as she spends her very manner improves. She holds her head at a more distinguished angle, she is slower and more idle in her movements; she asserts wittily instead of implying timidly; she looks fearlessly instead of glancing shyly; and when comes the day of so complete an emancipation that sovereigns can be "splashed" instead of shillings, yet another make-believe *grande dame* can almost pass for the real thing!

Enforced pinching, screwing, and saving narrows mind, soul, chest, and general outlook; unhampered expenditure expands the opinions, the manners, the heart, and the requisite sense of personal self-respect.

No indisputably charming woman has ever saved for any considerable length of time. She may have been poor and acutely sensible of her own poverty, but in

spite of this she didn't save. She spent what she hadn't got to spend, she "splashed" without anything to splash with, until at last a brilliant capacity for expenditure reaped its own reward, and the money—from sheer gratitude at being artistically handled, perhaps—came along !

A dangerous theory ? Yes, very dangerous, very demoralising ; but then again one has only to point to dozens of suitably comforting examples which show the spendthrift residing in Holloway, in the workhouse, or on the Embankment benches instead of living in a desirably luxurious house, flat, or hotel, or perhaps reveal him wearing garments marked with an arrow instead of clothes neatly lettered with his own initials, and eating skilly out of a tin instead of enjoying salmis of game off a glistening Doulton plate, to put us quite right when we contemplate a taxi instead of a 'bus, or despatching a red-stamped letter instead of a half-penny post card.

Economy, for some regrettable reason, doesn't make for personal charm or attraction ; but it does make for personal comfort and security ; therefore, it's for the spender with the open purse in his hand to decide, and to look ahead before he decides.

Decision, too, is always a dangerous thing !

But to-day Anna Merrick was not looking ahead or doing anything mundane of that description ; she was just spending (of some one else's money) as much as she wanted to spend, and she was feeling already as if Fate were lifting her back to the level from which death, poverty, and the City had dragged her.

Quite arrogant she felt, lying back in a deck chair

with a hired rug covering her knees and an up-to-date novel (bought at a bookstall with reckless disregard of discount) in her hands ; and when a medium-sized man in a large coat passed and repassed, and looked and re-looked, Anna knew that the City had not dragged out and battered down a properly-born, properly-bred young woman's love of admiration. For it is only the woman bereft of imagination, artistic temperament, and that unquenchable lightheartedness which is the particular heritage of a racial right to be *insouciant* and assured who are minus the natural feminine desire for admiration or appreciation.

Admiration should be the wine and meat and perpetual youth and perpetual power of every woman in the world, and those who don't want it are either those who can't get it or those who have not been born to any joy-of-living whatsoever. . . .

And though Anna scarcely realised the large-coated man as an individual being she felt delighted that he passed and re-passed—delighted because she knew that he was admiring the pink kisses which sea-salt breezes had blown upon her cheeks, and the diamond sparkle which freedom and excitement had put into her eyes.

And such knowledge was a realisation of her own power—her own power to be something (as a woman), and to do something (as a woman), in the world.

Anna smiled—not at the large-coated man, but at everything and everybody.

She smiled when, after an hour of comparative smoothness, they cut into water that leaped and splashed and rocked the steamer from side to side as

though it were a mechanical toy made specially to serve as sport for mischievous waves ; she smiled when one person after another rose and swayed and staggered down to the stuffy upholstered inferno below ; she smiled when she herself continued to feel easy, comfortable, and contented, as though she were sitting on a big Chesterfield in a soft-shaded drawing-room ; and finally she smiled when the grey, green, and white cliffs and hills of Dieppe came in sight.

She was not Anna Merrick. She continually told herself that Anna Merrick had been left behind in the City or in the Parsons Green lodgings, while a young woman who was ready to be infinitely less decorous and infinitely more daring had taken her name and brought it over to Normandy. . . .

Then after landing came more tipping, and this time on a far larger and more expensive scale (surely never before had the pillaging harbour robbers with their ambassadorial manners and blue linen jackets reaped a more fruitful harvest !), until at last Anna stood on the narrow strip of cobble-stoned pavement outside the customs and wondered how to get to Verneval.

“Où est la diligence pour Verneval ?” she asked of one small sandy-haired youth who looked as if he might be less voluble than the rest.

But they *all* heard, and they *all* answered.

“Il n'y a pas de diligence pour Verneval, madame.”

“La diligence ne part que le matin à neuf heures et à huit heures du soir.”

“C'est trop loin de Verneval.”

“Vingt kilomètres—ou davantage.”

“ Vous ne pouvez pas arriver à Verneval aujourd’hui, madame.”

Anna felt momentarily dismayed. What *did* they all mean ? No diligence for Verneval—the diligence went only at nine in the evening and eight in the morning ! It was too far to Verneval—twenty miles or more ! Impossible to reach Verneval to-day !

Oh ! what could be the truth ? Where was Verneval ? Was the whole business a hoax ? Was it only a—

But at this point her disturbed reflections were cut short.

A vehicle had drawn up—a strange vehicle, half market cart, half char-à-banc, drawn by a great Normandy mare, who after steadily tramping over twenty kilometres looked as if she had achieved nothing more laborious than a wild canter from one end of the Row to the other, and guided by a blue-linen garbed driver with a peaked cap and the frankest, most engaging smile in the world.

With exhilarating politeness he raised his cap and spoke.

“ La dame pour Le Vallon Vert, Verneval ?” he enquired, addressing Anna, and smiling a smile which seemed as a manifestation of the entire *entente cordiale*.

“ Oh ! yes—yes—I thought nobody would ever come ! ” cried Anna, who just at the moment couldn’t satisfactorily express acute relief in any language but her own.

The blue-linen-clad driver didn’t understand, but he smiled as if he did, and lifted out a painted wooden panel set in the back of the vehicle.

“Est ce que madame préfère d'être placée sur le siège ou en arrière à côté du bagage ?” he enquired, indicating the vacant half of a narrow blanket-covered plank which served as a seat for the driver.

Anna chose the latter alternative, and five minutes later the fat white mare was once again setting out on the road for Verneval.

The real journey was beginning at last.

CHAPTER IX

A MATTER OF MILES

AFTER they had gone up six hills and down five, and passed through one small town and four villages, Anna was on sufficiently chatty terms with the blue-linen-garbed driver to have learnt that his name was "Pierre," that the white mare's name was "Mignon," that Le Grand Verneval came before Le Petit Verneval, and that Le Vallon Vert was to be found at Le Petit Verneval.

"How much farther is it?" she enquired, in the pure, careful French which she had learnt from an old Académie professor—a friend of her father's who had contrived to pay a loan advanced for the purchase of a defunct Grand Duke's library by means of giving French lessons to the scientific doctor's fair-haired little daughter. This protracted course of instruction spreading over several years may have been worth more or less than the Grand Duke's library, but both the *professeur* and the doctor had taken life too largely and too seriously for such small calculations to find any place in their scheme of general reckoning. It was enough for them both that the daughter's

French became fluent and pure, and that the Grand Duke's library contained a plethora of genuine first editions.

"*Encore douze kilomètres environ, madame,*" replied Pierre, speaking his own language deep down in his throat, speaking pleasantly and lightly, as though every mile, like everything else in his Normandy world of green fields and more or less unmade roads, was a genial jest.

It would be impossible to imagine Pierre taking anything seriously until one saw Pierre fiercely demanding an extortionate fare from some dogged British tourist determined enough to persist in his grammarless, verbless protest ; but at such moments the insouciant Pierre could be more terrifying than any enraged East-End hooligan.

To-day, however, Pierre was all pleasantness and humour. He knew that this *demoiselle* whom he had been dispatched to meet and bring back to the low-roofed *pension* of Madame Lebusson would be just as willing to pay twenty francs for the drive as ten, and that in her case there would be no need (as in the case of a recently departed German rubber-merchant) to waylay the *voiture* chartered for the return journey, seize the baggage, and block the lane until another ten francs had been extorted.

For an isolated French village is far more lawless and exempt from legal protection than any South Sea Island. Each individual villager makes his own laws and plans for the plundering of alien visitors, and every other individual villager aids and abets those laws and plans with that splendid show of

cohesive fraternity which is alone born of a mutual desire to thieve.

It is a privilege not to be murdered on account of your watch, a boon if your rings are not torn off by main force, and a hospitable favour if you are not drugged in order that more easy access may be gained to your purse.

But in the case of this blonde *demoiselle* from London Pierre knew that there would be no trouble whatever, so he continued to smile kindly and show his beautiful teeth while consenting that Mignon should rest by the way in order to enjoy an impromptu meal eaten off ears of amber wheat which Anna plucked for the purpose.

And *such* tales he told of Mignon's partiality for sugar, till one franc found its way from the *demoiselle's* handbag to his pocket for the sole and express purpose that this sweet-toothed Normandy mare might be treated to one whole pound of her favourite delicacy !

Then the *demoiselle* would insist that at the bottom of the next hill she and Pierre should get out and help push the creaking vehicle, and though Pierre explained that these big Normandy horses were harnessed in such a fashion that half the weight of any burden was removed he was quite willing to fall in with any of the *demoiselle's* kindly suggestions for the easing of Mignon's task.

So on they went, past poppy-flecked fields of wheat and corn, beyond which stretched the blue, gently-restive ocean ; past stone and gilt crucifixes at the base of which lay many a humble bunch of wild flowers withering in the sun ; past odd sheds and

small meaningless stone huts, till at last—after the wooded valley of Le Grand Verneval had been left behind—Pierre pointed to a second massed block of trees and thatched roofs lying less than a quarter of a mile ahead.

“ *Le Petit Verneval, Mademoiselle,*” he said, giving Mignon’s smooth unruffled side an almost imperceptible flick with a long blade of grass which served as a make-believe whip.

And when five minutes later they turned down to the left, past a pond and past a shed filled with mildly-inquisitive cows, Anna felt as if the story of her life had almost begun.

One of the five little white mice must be waiting for her at Le Petit Verneval !

CHAPTER X

IN THE CHALET

ONE pond—two ponds—four ponds—six ponds—eight ponds were passed ; a few small *châlets* used either as shops or private abodes ; innumerable miniature farms composed of one cow, one pig, two fowls, and a dog ; and then Mignon, without any tightening of the reins or spoken command, came to a halt in front of a long low three-storeyed house to which a small red-roofed annexe had been added.

Anna felt delighted, as we do feel when youth has not long begun and the pulse of adventure beats high—delighted with the grey house, vivid white shutters, vivid green-painted flower-pots filled with vivid scarlet geraniums, and particularly delighted with the homely, welcoming smile of a fat lady who emerged from the open front door.

Pierre lifted out the panel and Anna alighted.

“ *Est que ce Le Vallon Vert ?* ” she whispered.

“ *Oui, mademoiselle—Le Vallon Vert—et Madame Lebusson !* ” he said, performing the ceremony of introduction with the easy grace of one thoroughly accustomed to such small social observances. It was evidently a Verneval custom for the *cocher* to

make new visitors known to the proprietress of the hotel !

" You—one young lady what to come—wrote—Mademoiselle Merrick—no ? " said Madame, after giving a rapid shake of the head in the direction of Pierre—a signal which caused Mignon's master to replace the portmanteau which he had begun to lift from the cart.

Anna reflected. *She* hadn't written—but then presumably someone else had, so it would be less confusing to reply in the affirmative.

" *Oui, je suis Mademoiselle Merrick—je suis venu Londres,*" she answered, speaking in French, with the amiable desire to show Madame Lebusson that there was no need for further verbal contortions of an inoffending language.

But Madame wasn't going to take any such hint—not she, indeed ! Twenty years ago she had been to school at Rouen, where three terms of English taught by a German-Swiss professor had made her quite *au fait* with the language—added to which there was never a summer without at least five or six British visitors putting up at the *pension* in the valley !

Madame Lebusson *could* speak English, and Madame Lebusson *would* speak English, and nothing and nobody should prevent Madame Lebusson from speaking English !

" Ah !—yes—I tell you not room here in house—but at *Châlet*, yes !—two mineete—only two mineete—come ! pleze ! " she said—from which response Anna gathered that her fate was to be the sorry one known to Margate pleasure-seekers as " sleeping out ! "

But, after all, it wouldn't matter if the *châlet* was—as Madame Lebusson had so concisely explained—only two minutes' walk from the *pension* itself.

So, after paying Pierre three times the fare he had any right to demand (with an extra *franc* for Mignon), Anna followed the ponderous bouncing form of Madame Lebusson down the main road—a public highway represented by a narrow hedge-grown lane, on either side of which rose gently-swelling hills covered with that brilliantly green grass which tells its own tale of a wet season and damp valley soil.

But the "two mineete" proved to be a somewhat elastic order of calculation, as Anna ruefully discovered after walking not considerably less than the eighth of a mile, before they stopped in front of a small glass-roofed store, at the back of which stood the white wooden *châlet*, with a flight of painted steps reaching from the ground to the first-floor balcony.

Madame nodded her smoothly-coiffed head a great many times in order to indicate how thoroughly satisfied *she* felt with the accommodation offered to her guest, and also how thoroughly satisfied the guest must be as well.

"Come—pleze!" she said, leading the way past the glass-roofed store, through a small muddy yard in which twenty noisy hens fought for the favour of one self-engrossed cock, and up the elaborate ladder.

"Zis room—scene good!—say 'Louise' when any-seeng required—ze dinner at seven o'clock! Au revoir, mademoiselle!" and thus concluding the interview, Madame Lebusson threw open a French window opening on to the tiny wooden *plateau* at the

top of the steps, before bouncing down the painted ladder and hurrying through the serried ranks of the fowls.

This was her room—this high-ceilinged, carpetless apartment, which had evidently been a *salon* hastily transformed into a bedroom when overflow visitors from Le Vallon Vert were likely to require accommodation !

Anna looked round and wondered how she would unmake or make any sort of toilet with no accessories save an enamelled hand-basin set on the top of a marble-topped Sheraton china cupboard, and a small mirror framed in chipped Sèvres flowers and hung midway between floor and ceiling. Also the aspect of the bed was fearsome—likewise the French windows opening on to the painted ladder were without any means of being secured against Normandy peasants with burglarious intent !

And the doors ! Never before had Anna seen so many doors ! A door opening into the narrow main passage ; a door opening into what appeared to be a species of semi-kitchen, semi-workshop ; a door which proved to be a slice cut out of the wooden wall, and swung on hinges, opening into a deep fathomless cupboard ; a second glass-paned door opening on to a second wooden balcony ; and a lower and smaller door opening into another deeper and yet more unfathomable cupboard !

And not one key, one lock, one bolt divided between the number !

“ Louise ! Louise ! ”

She had been told to call “ Louise ”—there was

nothing to do except to call "Louise," to stand in the passage and continue calling "Louise" until someone came to bring a few minor accessories such as water, towels, candle, and matches.

But though Anna called and called and recalled, with all the lung-power at her command, there was no response. "Louise" was, presumably, a myth—an efficient *femme-de-chambre* existing solely in the region of Madame Lebusson's optimistic imagination! It was useless to call "Louise" when—when nothing more helpful than a large solemn-faced retriever appeared upon the scene!

But such a serious, reliable sort of retriever he was, mounting the wooden steps with calm, doggy dignity, and looking at Anna with friendly enquiry in his golden-brown eyes.

"If only you were Louise, and could tell me where to find water, towels, and lights, *how* I would love you, and buy you biscuits to-morrow morning!" exclaimed Anna, smoothing the satin-beaver sleekness of his head.

The retriever allowed himself to be smoothed; then, after uttering a bark that was too short, high-pitched, and *staccati* for a British bark, he walked slowly up a narrow flight of stairs, and into a room which contained a japanned bath, three japanned jugs, a pile of clean rough towels, a tall brass candle-stick, half a dozen boxes of dangerous sulphurous matches, a cold-water tap, an oil stove, a sack of potatoes, a string of onions, a bundle of hay, piles of unripe apples, and a box of tools.

The situation was saved—the retriever had led

the way. It would now be possible for Anna to wash herself, dry herself, and light herself to bed !

“ You are the best chambermaid I have ever seen—it shall be *two* pounds of biscuits in the morning ! ” she cried, committing the solecism of addressing a Normandy dog in her own language. But he appeared to comprehend, wagged his tail with heavy dignity, and sat down with an air of proprietorial satisfaction in the bundle of hay while Anna helped herself to the necessities of the moment, and then returned to her own room before descending the painted ladder *en route* for dinner at the *pension*, and perhaps for the “ lady who would possibly call on the evening of her arrival ! ”

But no “ lady ” called, and as Anna sat through a greasy, many-coursed meal, eaten off rough, unironed tablecloths, and served in a dim and gloomy room lighted with home-made gas—manufactured from *essence d'automobiles*—a gradual drop took place in the high level of her optimistic outlook.

A few common provincials—and who is so provincial as the *Provencal*?—attempted to get into genial conversation as they passed chunks of much-perforated bread and filled her with an undrinkable fawn-tinted fluid, which was evidently provided without extra charge. But Anna couldn’t talk ; she felt too restless, and afraid, and expectant ; therefore, when the last course of holey cheese, eaten in conjunction with holey bread, was concluded, she left the *pension*, and immediately set out for the *châlet* behind the glass-roofed store.

But oh ! it was dark, densely dark, in these unlighted

Normandy lanes, for not one of the many small painted structures which in the daytime called themselves *Hôtel de la Plage*, *Hôtel Maritime*, *Grand Hôtel*, etc., showed the faintest illumination at either window or door.

Anna stumbled on. She felt afraid. She thought affectionately of Mrs. Smith, of Lawson Rolt, and tolerantly of the City ; and finally, after stumbling into cart ruts and knocking against wooden fences, she reached the glass-roofed store—now sombre, silent, and unlighted !

Through the gate, across the yard, up the wooden ladder, and into the-room-of-many-doors-which-wouldn't-lock !

Anna fumbled about to find the matches, and as she was struggling to make some sort of sulphurous illumination all the horrors of human snoring broke the silence of the summer night !

A man was snoring—somewhere ! A woman was snoring—somewhere !

The hideous sounds penetrated through the thin wooden walls, and caused Anna to conjure up a dozen gruesome pictures.

She had seen the greasy old man who served in the shop, and licked his fingers before cutting and weighing the *Gruyère* cheese consumed at *Le Vallon Vert* ; she had seen an evil-faced, buxom young woman who had been scrubbing the red-brick tiles. They both slept here—they both snored—the doors wouldn't lock—she was afraid—afraid—afraid !

CHAPTER XI

WHEN WAITING ENDS

IT was morning—morning which, besides being a time of unsettled complexions, lowered vitality, and lack-lustre eyes, is a time when hope may reassert her sway, and temporarily dispel forebodings of the previous night.

When it is morning everything may happen before a curtain of shadows again drops over the world. Wealth may happen, fame may happen, love may happen! In the morning it *should* be worth while troubling to live!

And with the morning Anna's overnight fears and depression dispersed like the sea-blown mists drifting away across the hills.

She had slept. Despite the snoring and the unlocked doors and the fearsome bed she had slept hope and expectation back into her heart.

To-day everything would happen!

She knew it while she dressed and arranged her gold-silk hair in more elaborate rolls and puffs than the events of these last two years, spent mainly in an office east of Temple Bar, had inspired.

She knew it while she lifted her voice and sang—

lightly, flippantly, trillingly, as she had sung in those days before the City muted all the music that was in her soul and at her throat.

Yes, to-day everything would happen, and because everything would happen she could feel all the stifled instincts of her reckless and ambitious young womanhood rising within her as sap rises in the branches of spring-flowering trees.

And to-day she looked (at least, so she was told by the old china-framed mirror) as she had always known she was intended to look—demure and staid, with that make-believe primness which is the very most dangerous form of all coquetry.

Love, too, was laughing on her lips, love was smiling in her eyes, and love was lurking in the meshes of her soft yellow hair—not love in any pronounced or recognisable form, but just that indefinable air of invitation and readiness which lures even the man-in-the-street without his knowing that he is being lured.

In the Cornhill office of the Automatic Change Delivery Co., Anna Merrick had been a pretty girl whom a man here and there might admire, while the others found her insipid, depressed, and reserved. But here in a Normandy village, where the morning sun was shining and where the whole atmosphere seemed to be alive with expectancy and possibility, she was a subtly fascinating, acutely magnetic woman, with the spuriously innocent eyes and lips of a child who pretends to be good but doesn't know the way.

It was as if she was at last becoming what Nature and Destiny had meant her to be from the very first.

So, still singing and still smiling, Anna finished her

toilet by drawing in the shiny leather belt another couple of holes ; then she stepped out into the exuberant freshness of the morning air, ran down the elaborated ladder, and made her way through crowds of garrulous fowls to the road.

“ *Bon jour, monsieur !* ”

She couldn’t help saying it, although the individual addressed was nobody more important or desirable than the snoring proprietor of the general store and of the *Châlet*.

“ *Bonjour, madame,* ” he replied, so genially and civilly that the evil-eyed, buxom (and likewise snoring !) young woman, who was at the moment engaged in preparing mash for the fowls, looked round and glared.

Anna was glad she glared. It always raises a woman’s sense of personal power when another woman glares. . . .

Then came a brisk walk to the *Châlet*, followed by the very worst rolls and coffee ever made in France or out of it, and then—then the day and its happenings were due to begin !

Out of the front door Anna stepped into the garden, which was gay with green “ tremble grass,” scarlet flowerpots, flaring monbretia, gaudy yellow cane chairs, and clusters of golden-rod—the state flowers of Tennessee.

But she could not stay here—she was restless, and the salt of the sea was calling her to the sands.

“ *Madame Lebusson !* ” She put her head in at a little opening in the wall which served as an office window of the most primitive description.

" If any one should come for me—er—should ask for me, please say that I've gone down to the beach, and shall stay there all the rest of the morning."

" That all right—I say!—I tell—all right—thank you!" replied Madame, beaming at her own sense of linguistic excellence; after which Anna passed through the white-painted gate before turning down the lane towards the sea.

And how busy everything was this morning! All the shutters of every tiny five-roomed " hotel " were open; tables and chairs were set out beneath striped awnings, as if all the *al fresco* gaiety of Ostend and Vienna were afloat; small schoolboys were meeting each other and calling each other "*monsieur*" with an air of ridiculous ceremony which made their coming manhood seem a very petty and unimportant business; patient rough-coated dogs were drawing little carts filled high with yellow melons and hard bead-like grapes; freshly-made cakes and creamy *patisseries* were being brought on big baking-sheets from the ovens to the shaded windows of the little refreshment stores; the baker's ten-year-old son was carrying round the *pain du ménage*, shaped in long rolls tall as himself; and at the very largest and most important hotel (quite an imposing wooden structure with a species of bar as well as a semi-open-air "*salon de bal*"), printed bills were being displayed to the effect that this very same evening a concert would be given, and that the admission would be 1 *franc* or 25 *centimes*, according to the seat selected.

But Anna, who looked at everything, took in nothing, for the reason that approaching events about which

she could neither prophesy nor conjecture made her practically oblivious to the picturesque quaintness of her present surroundings.

Something was going to happen, and to happen very soon ! She could feel that events were marching, and that Destiny was guiding something or somebody to her side. The time for wondering and waiting was almost over—almost over now !

And here, where the road ended and was spanned by a high red bridge reaching from one cliff to the other, was a shining expanse of chalk and sand and stones leading down to the sea.

Anna broke into a run as she passed beneath the bridge, then, leaping down a jagged chalky ledge, she sat down on a great isolated tuft of coarse dry grass—and waited.

Waited while a few copper-skinned fishermen and women toiled down to the water with their nets—waited while the little waves crept up over the green, slime-covered rocks—waited while the sun, like a new king as coronation day draws near, grew more sure of his sovereign supremacy.

And then—then a sound that was new upon the roughly-rutted road—a sound—a halt—

Anna turned round—looked in the direction of the bridge.

It was over—the time of uncertainty and waiting was all over now !

CHAPTER XII

THE GIRL FROM TOWN

THE curved arch of the bridge served as frame for a picture.

Background—vivid blue sky, grass-grown green banks rising on either side of a grey rutted valley road.

Foreground—a girl and a horse—a tall white horse on whose back sat the girl riding astride, Yankee fashion.

She was a very fair girl, a girl who appeared quite daintily plump in these days when every young woman aspires to be a fleshless “flapper,” and a girl who was obviously sure of herself and the world’s reception of herself.

Her tinting of wild-rose pink, cowslip yellow, gentian blue, and creamy gardenia whiteness appeared almost incredibly exquisite—like colours of a crystoleum painting newly done.

Anna looked at her, thought she had never before seen anyone or anything so extraordinarily beautiful, and then suddenly felt as though the bridge had become the frame set above a mirror instead of a frame set above a picture.

She was staring at herself—at a reflection of herself

—not as she was, but as she could be, as nature had intended her to be before the grey dreariness of the city had done its work !

She could be like this—she could look serenely on at the world because she knew that the world was looking rapturously on her—*she* could grow plump and rounded as a young cream-fed kitten—*she* could hold herself fearlessly and almost arrogantly upright if she were wearing the most perfect triumph of tailoring that Mayfair could produce—*she* could—

Ah ! but the surface of the mirror—of the picture—was disturbed ! The girl had raised her little whip in easy familiar salutation—the girl was speaking—the girl was smiling !

“ *Hul-lo !* I guess we’d better get on with knowing each other, Miss Merrick—and I guess you’ll do ! ” she said, before swinging over one dainty trousered leg to join the other dainty trousered leg, and dropping easily to the ground.

Anna watched with a sense of fascination that was almost uncanny—watched her as with business-like decision she led the tall white horse to a more plentifully grassed spot, took out the bit, slipped a long strap through the bridle, and then fastened the strap to a low-growing stump of tree.

“ Now I reckon you’re fixed up and won’t worry us while we talk our business ! ” was an observation addressed to her steed, before turning away and walking towards Anna with the most exquisite thing in imitation swaggers possible to conceive.

Then Anna spoke at last—spoke with an unconscious drawl, with an unconscious hint of singsong in her

voice. She couldn't help it—already her own identity seemed as if it were being merged into that of the American girl whose hair was only two shades lighter than her own.

" You—it was you who wrote to me, wasn't it ? " she asked.

" Yes, it was I who sent along the li-li-le letter ; and to introduce myself with ceremony I may tell you that my name is Cecile Clare Kissler ! "

Anna smiled—the other girl smiled. They might have been sisters with only the difference of prosperity between them.

" It's pretty warm to-day—if you'll excuse me, my dear, I'll be comfortable," said the other girl, as she threw aside the low, broad-brimmed bowler hat and took off a smart full-skirted frock-coat cut long enough to meet the demands of feminine sartorial propriety.

And there she was, wearing a loose white muslin skirt, a pair of dark grey riding-breeches, and a pair of brilliantly-polished top boots—a boy with a girl's softly-rounded bosom, delicately-curved hips, and dazzling mass of cowslip-yellow curls—an exquisitely girlish boy—a modern *Hermaphroditus* after union with the fountain-nymph of Salmacis !

Anna looked at her and thought of the *Duc de Reichstadt*—of *Hamlet*, even !—of any stage-boy whom stage women have idealised. And when the American girl threw herself down on the tuft of grass at her side Anna felt as though it might be that some up-to-date young Olympian god had come to woo !

" Well, now, Miss Merrick, I expect you'll be pleased to hear why I had the audacity to fetch you right away

from London to this queer locality?" was Cecile Clare Kissler's first observation after she had whipped away a great poisonous-fanged fly which had been strolling across the polished surface of those small and tall top boots.

"Yes, I want to know—I want to know!" replied Anna softly and half breathlessly. It was almost as if she were afraid to speak; as if she were afraid of proving herself unsuitable for something—for anything!

"Then I'll tell you right away. But first of all look here—" (she leaned sideways, and, stretching out for the discarded frock coat, drew from one of the unexpected pockets a small oblong mirror framed by a narrow rim of turquoise set in silver). "Yes, look here at Anna Merrick and at Cecile Clare Kissler—look at them and just tell me how you are struck!"

Anna looked—she began to understand.

"It's an extraordinary likeness!" she answered, speaking in a whisper, as if already they shared a secret which not even the brown-skinned fisherpeople or the tall white horse must hear.

"Yes, I knew it was extraordinary directly I saw your picture in that issue of *Woman's Sphere*, and it is even better than I hoped. Of course your hair is not so fair as mine, your eyebrows are lighter, your lashes don't grow quite so light at the roots and dark at the tips, you are much thinner, your nose makes me real spiteful by being straighter—but all that can be fixed up by Willy, I bet!"

"Who's Willy?" asked Anna wonderingly.

"You'll find that out, my dear, when you make your way to Wardour Street to get rigged up as something

what you ain't! Yes, it'll do all right, Miss Merrick"—(here a quaint return to primness and formality)—“it'll do all right if you can sing as well as a sparrow, and if you can make it convenient to take it on !”

“To take *what* on ?” whispered Anna—and one fair head was bent low over the other and fairer head, so that no word of explanation should escape or be blown out to the fisherfolk at sea.

“Take on the game of being Cecile Clare Kissler, playing in the coming piece at the Duke of Carmine's Theatre, my dear!—take on the game of being ME ! I'll try and make you understand how things are. I am—as I daresay you've sized up by now—an American girl. I was born in Iowa; my poppa is an Episcopalian clergyman—as they put it

in last month's *New York Moon*. ‘*It seems mighty hard to realise that a young girl who less than five months ago was singing in her father's church with the rich light of the stained-glass windows streaming down upon her golden hair should now be playing a leading part in one of our great London productions !*’ See ?”

“Are you playing a leading part ?” interrupted Anna, with the wondering awe of a person who has never seen the stage except across the heads of the orchestra.

“Oh ! no—no ! But they say those nice li-ll-le tactful things in the American press, you know. No, but I've got a dear li-ll-le part—several lines and a verse to myself to sing, and right up in the front all the time. That's a pretty big thing, my dear, as you may guess ; but to you, of course, I'll confess that I shouldn't

have got it so soon except for what Godmama's done!"

"And what has she done?" Anna was desperately excited to know what "Godmama" had done!

"Well, she's done it to spite poppa, who always talked about it being 'the devil's own device' to go on the stage. Godmama, you see, was on the stage, and when Kennedy Lemon (the millionaire who first opened the Ramway River Oil Fields) died he left her pretty nearly a quarter of his money. So, to spite poppa, Godmama said to me, '*Say, Cecile Clare, if you like to go to England and get on the stage I'll give you a start by putting three thousand dollars in the new production at the Duke of Carmine's, provided they give you a nice little part and help you along. And you shall have plenty of money in the bank to draw upon, and a flat of your own, and a car for the season, and you must trust to luck and your own talent for the rest. If, when you've spent all I mean to allow you, there aren't any big results, you'll just have to go back to poppa and Iowa, and to sing in the church again instead of at the theatre; so it rests with you to show whether you're any good or not!*' That's what Godmama said to me, my dear, and that's the way I'm fixed!" And as Cecile Clare Kissler finished her sentence she slashed viciously at one of the small, tall, brilliantly-polished top boots.

"Then—er—of course—" (Anna felt embarrassed, she didn't know what was the most tactful comment to make)—"er—you don't want to go back to Iowa?"

Cecile sat bolt upright, stuck her heels into the sand, and looked more like a "principal boy" than ever.

"*My!*—no—no—it would about bowl me over to

go back to Iowa ! " she answered, with real intensity in her soft drawling voice. " Why, I just *love* my work ! I want to study and study and study everything, so that before Godmama's money is all gone I shall be so big and so famous that every one in New York and Paris and Vienna and—and everywhere will look around when Cecile Clare Kissler comes along ! And I *could* do it, Miss Merrick—I could do it if it wasn't for breaking off these seven or eight months and losing my place with the managers and the public ! "

" And—and are you going to break off, then, Miss Kissler ? "

The question roused Cecile Clare from the momentary reverie into which she had fallen.

" Why, yes—I must ; and that's where you've got to help me, my dear !—that's why you've got to be ME, Anna Merrick ! Directly a friend of mine showed me that picture in *Woman's Sphere* I saw what she saw—which was that if *you* only looked as much like me as the photograph looked liked me, and if you were a cute, plucky girl, there could be benefits on both sides. You *are* quite as much like me as I hoped you would be, and I guess you're a pretty smart girl, so it seems as if we ought to be able to fix it up ! "

" What ? For me to—to—" "

" For you to go back to London in three weeks' time and take my place in the new piece that'll begin rehearsing in a month. I gave up my post in '*The Caramel Sailor*' over a week ago because I told Mr. Herlmann that I was feeling queer and must have a change, but signed my contract to be back for '*The Aeroplane Girl*' in a month. I don't know how I

dared to sign it when—when I wanted to go away ! I reckon I just trusted to luck—and luck has brought me you ! ”

The two girls looked at each other ; then they smiled one of those curiously intimate and comprehending smiles which are sometimes exchanged between complete strangers who feel the drawing bond of mutual sympathy and usefulness.

“ I wonder if I can do it ! ” murmured the daughter of a scientific doctor.

“ I *know* you can do it ! ” answered the daughter of an Episcopalian parson.

And a spider crawled from beneath the tuft of grass before crossing an inexpensive tan shoe *en route* for a brilliantly polished top boot.

Every woman likes to think that a spider brings good luck !

Sometimes it does—sometimes it doesn’t !

The insects are not to be relied upon with any degree of certainty.

CHAPTER XIII

THE PART TO BE PLAYED

THE white horse had grown tired of nibbling coarse dry grass, the sun had risen to almost the height of his power, and a girl who looked like a girl and a girl who looked like a boy were standing up to conclude the fag end of their conversation.

“ It is agreed, then, that you sing to-night at the Plage Hotel here (they’ll be only too glad to let you do a turn if I buy up a couple of dozen seats) ; and if your performance is good enough to be *my* performance the whole business is fixed up ? ” And as Cecile Clare put the first of her final queries she picked up the broad-brimmed bowler hat and placed it on the smooth softness of her cowslip-yellow hair.

For a moment she looked like a very rakish boy-about-town.

“ Yes—oh ! —yes— ”

“ And if the singing’s all right you’ll come straight away to Paris to get your hair bleached a couple of shades lighter and your eyebrows dyed half a shade darker ? ”

“ Yes— ”

“ And for the next three weeks you’ll swallow all

the cream and all the eggs and all the new bread that comes your way so that people shan't say, '*My! Cecile Clare's wasting away!*'

"Ye-s——"

"And for the next three weeks you'll be with me all the day long, and learn to drawl like I drawl, and get yourself up in all the patter of Cecile Clare Kissler?"

"If I can——"

"And you'll learn to ride as Cecile Clare rides——"

"Oh, can't I keep to the old way? When my father and I lived in the country we used to ride every day, but not, oh! not—*those*!" And Anna pointed with a gesture of passionate pleading to the grey cloth breeches which bridged over the gulf between a muslin blouse-skirt and two shining top boots.

Cecile Clare laughed the laugh of an obstinate baby.

"Yes, my dear—*these*! It wouldn't be Cecile Clare Kissler riding in the Row with both her legs on the same side of the mare's back! And during the next three weeks you'll learn to *be* Cecile Clare Kissler, and when the three weeks of learning and fattening and bleaching and dyeing are done you'll go right back to London with Cecile Clare Kissler's chaperon-companion, and you'll live in the furnished flat that Cecile Clare Kissler has taken for a year, and you'll spend Cecile Clare Kissler's money, and you'll wear Cecile Clare Kissler's gowns, and you'll answer Cecile Clare Kissler's letters—and when the year is over and Cecile Clare Kissler comes back you'll slip out of her place as you slipped into it, only with a beautiful big lump of money in your purse and the memory of lots of beautiful fun in your head! It'll be

fine, and I shall arrange about the concert on my way back now, and I shall motor over from du Leys this evening to hear you sing. If the singing's good enough, things'll whiz, my dear—they're just bound to whiz all the way along ! *Au revoir*, and just you lay yourself out to forget that you ever did one word of type-writing in your life. Remember you ain't Anna—*you're Cecile Clare !*" And with a pretty childish gesture of impulsive abandon Cecile kissed one hand before slipping on her coat, and then climbing (the white mare was too tall for a springing mount to be achieved without assistance) up into the saddle.

Anna remained standing by the tuft of grass and watched her as she rode away, the picture in the frame growing smaller and smaller as a white mare trotted up the chalky rutted road.

It was herself she was watching—not another girl who came from Iowa and sang on the stage, but just herself—*herself* !

Tightly Anna drew her serge skirts about her, and then swaggered demurely, as though *she* were a girl transformed into a boy by means of riding-breeches. Delicately she drawled a few sentences beginning with "*I guess*" and "*I reckon*" ; softly she laughed like a sulky baby might laugh ; innocently she stared after the manner of girls who have long ago laid their innocence to rest in a dark grave lined with black temptation and dazzling opportunities, then sweetly and impudently she sang as a petted canary might sing for some specially succulent morsel of temporarily withheld sugar.

This was a stage—this chalky sandy ridge was a

stage—the bridge and hills and road were a rustic back-cloth—and that brown-skinned fisherman was a beautiful young earl seated in the front row of the stalls.

Anna—(no, *Cecile!*)—Cecile would just glance at the beautiful young earl, demurely and staidly, as if he were an elderly coal-merchant—but still she *would* glance !

And he would look—and look again—while Anna brought off some smiling by-play in order to show the beauty of her teeth ; then when it came her turn to sing one tuneful silly little verse by herself she would swirl her skirts, and preen, and strut, and gaze up at the gallery, and gaze up at the boxes, and gaze up at the dress circle, and gaze everywhere except along the front row of the stalls.

Such tantalising treatment this would be for the beautiful young earl ; and when at last—just the very second previous to her exit—she thought fit to send half the flicker of a glance in his direction—oh ! how he ~~should~~ applaud, and watch and watch until she came back to the stage !

This was the sort of thing which Anna—(no, *Cecile!*)—which “Cecile” had been always meant to do. She knew it now—she felt quite sure of it now. Even in the old happy days of voluntary labour as her father’s secretary, when they had lived in the country and visited dull but very reputable county people, and went to dull county balls, she had been *meant* to sing and dance and to look spuriously innocent, and to ride astride, and to run a car, and to excite the admiration of beautiful young earls across the footlights.

She had been *meant* to do it. It was in her blood. Her mother had been the daughter of a bishop's younger son, and one grandmother had, of course, been the daughter of a bishop; but the other grandmother had always been verbally skated over and滑ed away from, so it was just possible that the other grandmother had sung and danced and looked demurely at earls, or had, anyhow, possessed some indecorous and unconventional qualities of a transmittable description.

Anyhow, no matter if heredity or natural inclinations were to be held responsible, the coming of Cecile Clare Kissler into Anna Merrick's life had achieved the result of undoing all which the flattening influence of hard-upness and the city had done, and of changing Anna Merrick into what she had always half-unconsciously wanted to be.

She had been a girl of work and drabs and greys and 'buses and economy and tears—now, from this very moment, she would be a girl of gaiety and blues and pinks and cars and money and laughter !

She would take life just as it came—which is so often the secret of a woman's personal successes. She would make appointments and break them if it suited her to break them: she would order frocks and not wear them: she would flatter the right people and not mean a word of the flatteries: she would take love where she found it, and forget all about it when the usefulness of the lover was ended.

She would not be actually heartless, actually cruel, or designedly unconscious—it was only that she would take life lightly and easily and gaily, and that,

to a certain extent, Fate should be paid out for ever putting the greyness of the city in her way.

And when the eight months or year were over—when it was time for Cecile Clare Kissler to come back and *be* Cecile Clare Kissler—then—then—well, by that time, perhaps, Anna would have drunk so deeply of Pleasure's light sparkling wine that all the emotional thirst of her nature would be slaked.

Perhaps she would just go back to where she was starting from to-day, or perhaps—perhaps—well, there is so much which may and can happen when a woman gets her chance !

Anna Merrick had got her chance—the doors of the house were open—it only remained now for her to walk in and take a prize !

CHAPTER XIV

“ IT’LL RUN ! ”

DINNER was over at the Hotel Magnifique, and, as usual, groups of people were lounging about the vestibule at the foot of the staircase.

There were all sorts of people—very superior people, so intensely superior that they didn’t even look at the other people ; smart people, who diffused soft rustling sounds, unique perfume, or unquestionable cigar aroma as they moved ; dull people, who read the advertisements in railway guides because no one wanted to talk to them ; English people—French people—American people—with a here-and-there smattering of other nationalities which don’t really count, except as regards such small issues as possible invasions, manufactures, treaties, and other insignificant details of an international description.

All the world over it’s the French, English, and Americans who are mainly responsible for general atmosphere. They make life what it is.

“ Is the little devil really leaving to-morrow ? ” said a big man who did big things on the racecourse, on the Stock Exchange, on the Bourse, and who invariably smoked the biggest cigar it was possible to secure.

"Yes, going by the night boat, I believe," replied a little man whose purple nose was of the good-form description which is tinted by means of Pol Roger and 1760 cognac, in contradistinction to the vulgar variety whose rich colour-scheme is due to cask beer and half-crown whisky.

"Rehearsing, I suppose—or *business*!" was the big man's gurgling response.

The little man snorted and shrugged his shoulders; he had got past the age of speculating on the subject of musical comedy girls. From his point of view it was always—*business*!

And over in the further corner, just in front of the fourth marble pillar, four English mamas of several exclusive English daughters were being obtrusively lenient and large-minded by unanimously agreeing that "she really seemed a charmingly modest and retiring girl; that of course there were some instances where perfect 'niceness' and virtue were to be found upon the stage; and that it was quite a pity that she was going away to-morrow."

Two very young Frenchmen lounging by the billiard-room door exchanged observations which hardly merit translation or transcription; a batch of Americans made remarks which, not being underhand, spiteful, or vile, could be twanged aloud with ear-splitting vehemence; and the other nationalities which don't matter gesticulated all that couldn't easily be said.

But the subject of whispered, shouted, and gesticulated remarks and observations was the same—it was the subject of Cecile Clare Kissler's unexpected departure on the morrow.

She had gone out riding before ten this morning, and on her return for *déjeuner* had announced that in all probability she would be "quitting" by the night boat to-morrow.

Everybody—not having anything else to wonder about just at the moment—wondered why she should be "quitting" so suddenly. They had all imagined, when they had troubled to imagine anything about it, that she would be staying at Chateau du Leys until rehearsals for "*The Aeroplane Girl*" were due to begin.

It was interesting to premise and wonder about this radiant young American actress who wore such radiant gowns, appeared to be so radiantly supplied with money, and had never done anything to show that she was in the least inclined to be radiantly wicked !

And now—now here she was coming down the broad green carpeted staircase with an apricot-tinted satin cloak half covering her lavender-grey chiffon frock, and a breath of dreamily-coloured tulle thrown across the cowslip-yellow of her smooth loose curls.

Miss Cecile Clare Kissler was evidently going out—Miss Cecile Clare Kissler looked like a living poem clothed in the tints of Spring !

"Come right along, Pauline!" she called out, turning her head over her shoulder, and speaking with the very pretty imperiousness of a person who pays but who, while being conscious of a right to command, does not set any extravagant store by her assured financial power.

"Yes, yes, I'm just here all the time," replied Miss Kray, following up less than a yard behind.

Cecile Clare smiled at her own impatience, and as she smiled took every one standing below into her confidence—as though she would say: "Did you ever see any one so real silly before? It was funny though, wasn't it?"

The four English mamas relaxed their thin lips almost imperceptibly, but the French contingent picked up Cecile's own little smile where it had been left off, while the Americans grinned with wide-mouthed geniality and went forward to meet her as she reached the great fur rug at the foot of the stairs.

"Say, Miss Kissler, it isn't correct that you're on the move to-morrow?" cried a dainty, impertinent-mannered young woman called Katherine Eva Kresh.

Cecile Clare, with a gentle kittenish gesture, laid one hand on the speaker's arm. She liked Katherine Eva Kresh. K. E. K. was always so pretty and well-powdered and well-mannered and well-frocked. Cecile Clare appreciated people like that.

"It just may be—or it just mayn't," drawled Cecile Clare, making a point of being prosy. For there is something grotesquely attractive about the intermittent prosiness of a quite young and quite beautiful girl. "You see I've got a sick friend in Paris who says she loves me more than she loves her own sisters even, and if I don't go and stay with her before I get on to work again she'll think me real mean. I shall call her upon the telephone in a little while, and if she right-down says I must go, then Miss Kray and I

will flit by the night boat to-morrow. But I bet I'll come back here before I start work again."

" Well, if you don't come back we must meet in London. I can write to the theatre any time, and ask you to lunch, can't I ? The Duke of Carmine's will find you, I suppose ? "

Cecile Clare looked at her full and vacantly in the eyes, then looked full and vacantly up at the ceiling, then back into Miss Kresh's eyes.

" Oh ! yes, that'll find me all the time, and I shall just *expect* you to write, and when we meet, you'll see what a staid, thin, solemn, hardworking person I am in London ! " And giving Miss Kresh's arm a friendly pressure Miss Kissler moved towards the huge swing doors, where Pauline Kray was busy chaffing the solid British father of a solid British family in just the very way in which that sort of person enjoys being chaffed by an attractive woman.

" Come, Pauline ! " said Cecile once more ; but yet again the cowslip-haired actress was doomed to be interrupted before she could reach the hotel's ponderous square motor, which had been waiting over half-an-hour.

Lady Margaret Effam stepped forward from a shady corner in which she had been sitting and reading a new book of rustic poems bound in white vellum and grey suède.

" I hope, my dear Miss Kissler, that the rumour of your sudden impending departure is not true ? " she said, betraying her customary inclination to thaw graciously and almost tenderly when addressing the sweet young worker in the cause of Art, whose highest ambition was to return home successfully worthy to

receive the praise and approbation of "poppa and momma."

"Thank you, Lady Margaret; it's real kind of you to say that," replied Cecile, with delicious humility; "but I'm afraid it's kind of true. You see—" Then came repeated and somewhat more elaborately embroidered explanations concerning the sick friend in Paris, to which Lady Margaret listened with interest and appreciation.

"Well, if you do decide to leave du Leys to-morrow, I—I hope"—(just for one moment this lady of the old school, this peer's daughter, and K.C.B. baronet's exclusive widow, paused. The *stage*! An *actress*! Could she do it? Yes, she had no sons, no nephews, and the young American girl's every instinct was so obviously noble, pure, candid! She *would* do it—she wanted to do it—she *would*!) "—I—er—hope, my dear Miss Kissler, that I shall be able to see you in London, and that later on you can, perhaps, spare me a few days down at Castle Woodshott? It would give me very great pleasure!"

Cecile responded with gratitude and appreciation that were not in the least vulgarly effusive or overdone, yet left behind an impression of real delight and gratification.

"Then I shall regard that as settled," was Lady Margaret's final observation before returning to the vellum-bound book of rustic poems, while Cecile Clare and Pauline Kray passed out of the smoothly-swinging entrance doors and into the waiting car.

"Even if the singing gets along all right, it won't be

easy ! " observed Cecile, as they swept round the curve of the broad yellow drive.

" Oh ! it shouldn't be difficult," responded the chaperon-companion, with a definiteness which seemed unconsciously to strengthen and coalesce the whole situation. Miss Kray was essentially one of those women who are sent into the world for the special purpose of engineering its intrigues and giving courage to its *intrigantes*. Half the population would fail to bring off successful deceptions if it were not for these specialists in the art of helping other people to do what they shouldn't do. They are veritable oil-cans to the machines of manœuvre as they pour out reassuring arguments and helpful suggestions, lubricating the wheels of finesse till not a single hitch or jar impedes their rhythmic revolutions.

No one would dare to love anyone they shouldn't love, to screen anything they shouldn't screen, to concoct any scheme which shouldn't be concocted, if it were not for the existence of these equipped professors graduated in the ugly schools of intrigue.

When, after half an hour's swift run, they reached Verneval, it was to find the main hedge-grown road alive with the rush of sight-seeing village humanity.

Proprietors, proprietresses, residents, and visitors were all hurrying along in the darkness towards the straggling wooden structure, which more suggested the idea of a massed block of stables, barns, garages, and primitive bars than of an hotel, at the curve of the lane facing the sea.

But the darkness ended when the Grand Hotel was reached, because there—by the aid of Japanese

lanterns, extraordinary petrol lamps, nightlights, and guttering candles—the wooden ground-floor verandah leading to the barn-like concert room was quite gaily illuminated.

Inside the concert room, where long rows of worm-eaten benches, with a score or so of unsteady wooden chairs—these representing the 1 *franc* and 25 *centimes* seats respectively—were arranged in lines, the audience was most satisfactorily numerous—so numerous that by the time Cecile Clare and her companion had taken their places hardly a vacant seat remained.

It always caused excitement when concerts were given at the Grand Hotel; but to-night, when village rumour stated that a beautiful and famous young actress from England was to figure on the programme, there seemed a special inducement for all the more cultured circles of Verneval to patronise the entertainment.

And at last when they were all seated in the obscure candle-lit barn—with a crowd of non-paying patrons filling the outside veranda as well—the appearance of a venerable grey-bearded artiste—brother of the snoring celebrity of the general store, and organist at a small chapel midway between Verneval and Dréport—heralded the beginning of the “show.”

The grey-bearded organist played a lugubrious “*Hymne de Nöel*” with improvised variations; Mademoiselle Thièfe, daughter of a farmer who owned two cows as well as several pigs and a pond, recited an effecting *morceau* entitled “*Bébé Pierre et Moi*”; a Manchester lady visitor staying at the hotel itself sang “*Ouvrez tes yeux bleus, ma mignonne,*” with so

unusual an accent that the majority of the audience believed her to be warbling a standard English ditty ; and then—then there was a hush of expectation—a babel of buzz such as is always heard when lower-class French folk believe themselves to be emitting almost inaudible whispers—a silence—and then Cecile Clare Kissler received something that was very much like a shock.

A girl was standing on the platform, a white-frocked girl, who, by means of a quaintly-adjusted china *crêpe* shawl of palest pink, fastened on one shoulder with a bunch of artificial blue roses, had achieved a startling likeness to the costume which Cecile herself had worn in the "Caramel Sailor"—a girl whose hair had been smoothed, and parted American fashion, and dropped to conceal all but the veriest tips of her ears—a girl whose eyebrows had been darkened with a hair-pin held over a candle—a girl whose eyes were innocent and demure as the eyes of a wondering kitten—a girl who—who—heavens ! a girl who already seemed to have assumed the personality of another girl sitting in the front row of the wooden benches !

For a second Cecile Clare's beautiful serenity was ruffled. She shivered—shivered because she almost felt that already she had ceased to *be* !

But could she sing ? Would Anna Merrick succeed or fail in this last test put for the purpose of ascertaining if she could step straight from a City office on to the stage of a West-End theatre ?

With an extraordinary sensation that was as much fear as hope—for somehow no woman in the world ever wants to be equalled by any other

woman—Cecile Clare Kissler asked herself these questions.

And in a moment the answer came.

A few chords played on a piano that was scarcely more musical than a toy harmonica, and by the bearded brother of the general store keeper—two bars of simple waltz accompaniment—and then Anna Merrick sang three verses of silly love-words set to a tune which was at least like half-a-dozen other waltz or popular pantomime melodies.

But it was the way she sang—the way she looked—which called for the rapturous, regularly-timed applause from all the outside patrons on the verandah, as well as from the inside patrons in the wooden, ill-lighted barn.

She had the smile of Anna Held, the divine, devilishly demure audacity of Anna Held's blue eyes, combined with a certain irresistible suggestion of some hidden *bond fide* innocence that was all her own. She was evidently trying to simulate an American accent, and the simulation came naturally as well as prettily.

And she could sing. Actually her voice was stronger and better than Cecile's voice, though at present without the attraction and maddening defying charm which results from a certain variety of professional instruction.

But three weeks would put all that right—three weeks of study and imitation would make her all that Cecile Clare Kissler had ever been, and, perhaps, a good deal that she had never dared hope to be as well.

When the song was over the girl standing on the low, candle-lighted platform looked at the girl seated on the

dusty wooden bench. There was appeal in her glance—and a query.

The appeal Cecile answered by a slow, smooth nod of her yellow head, the query by two softly-spoken words.

“ *It’ll run !* ” she said ; and somehow the verdict reached Anna standing there amidst candlelight and shadows.

It would run !

It was settled !

One of the five little white mice had nibbled open the door !

PART II

" There is scope for Chance everywhere ; let your hook always be hanging ready. In the eddies where you least expect it there will be a fish,"—OVID.

Beneath her eyelids deep
Love lying seems asleep,
Love, swift to wake, to weep,
To laugh, to gaze.—SWINBURNE.

CHAPTER I

A GIRL ON THE STAGE

A MAN stepped out of a doorway.

The man was Sir Gilbert Frayle—builder of the great new Pyramid Bridge, which enthusiastic people regarded as the eighth wonder of the world, and son of General Sir Garnet Frayle, of Selim Kopje fame ; and the doorway served as the entrance to small but particularly expensive bachelor quarters known as Mayfair Chambers, Piccadilly.

Without any of that half-assumed air of languid indecision so prevalent among young men whose clothes and ancestry are undeniable, Gilbert Frayle turned to the right, walked a few yards down a side street which contained a Tube station, and entered a shop.

It was a florist's shop, where single roses worth threepence were sold for a shilling, and whose young lady vendors looked as if the sweetness and purity of the flowers got on their nerves.

The head young lady, although greeting the customer of the moment with icily respectful courtesy, made it apparent that he was a regular patron worthy of more solicitous attention than would be bestowed

upon some unknown purchaser of an odd wreath, spray, or bouquet.

"Good evening — you received my note from Algiers ?" he enquired, looking as he spoke at a great stock of flaring dahlias. He was a man who never troubled to look at his fellow-creatures unless there was some reason for looking.

"You mean about the flowers for the opening night of 'The Aeroplane Girl,' Sir Gilbert ?" replied the head young lady, flicking her light eyelashes and tightening her thin lips.

"Yes—to Miss Kissler."

"Yes, they were sent as directed—violets and lilies."

"And every night since ?"

"Yes, sir, every night since."

"Then to-night send roses for a change—all the pink and white roses you've got in the place ; then continue varying them until I let you know."

"Thank you. Good evening, Sir Gilbert."

"Good evening."

The head young lady opened the door, Sir Gilbert went out, and that concluded certain preliminaries. He had been thinking about those flowers several times during the day, which was surprising even to himself. It was odd that he should come back just as keen upon a girl he had only seen across the footlights just before going away. Three weeks of the Nile and its customary accompaniments should have been calculated to finish off keenness of that particularly light and unimportant description.

Waste of money—a good deal of money when viewed

from no closer vantage ground than the stage-box or the second row of the stalls ; waste of time—a good deal of time when the reckoning of three performances a week of a musical comedy lasting from 8.30 to 11.15 was achieved ; and waste of—no, no, not any waste of sentimental emotion. Emotions which travel no further than across the heads of a string orchestra to the “boards” are not usually of a sentimental description !

Gilbert turned into Piccadilly and walked in the direction of the Circus—walked rather more quickly than usual, for the reason that it was already a quarter-past eight, and the curtain rang up at the half-hour. It was somewhat of a pristine notion to set such store on being in for the opening chorus, but as any production at the Duke of Carmine’s was generally worth seeing once from the beginning to the end, and as Gilbert had been “dam-ing” up in Egypt on the first night of the show, he—he—well, he thought he might as well be in for the “ring up” !

For a moment Gilbert Frayle smiled as he overtook most of the people who had been ahead some seconds previously, for it was amusing to realise how energetically he was hurrying on foot instead of taking a taxi—amusing, in fact, to realise that he was hurrying at all, when there was really nothing to hurry for.

He smiled again, but without any by-passer being remotely aware that the tall, dark man with the knitted silk muffler, opera hat, and dark moustache—a man who looked like half the other decently-bred, decently-clothed, decently-reserved men who are to be met

at the right places at the right time of year—was amused.

For Gilbert Frayle's moustache was of that protective variety which saves its wearer from ever giving himself away. So long as Gilbert Frayle refrained from shaving his upper lip it would be difficult to guess at what he thought or felt.

Also, not only was it difficult for other people to guess what he thought or felt, but he himself was anything but an adept at analysing his own emotions.

He knew that, in his opinion, people who "slopped over" or "gushed" ought to be put under chloroform—that a man should never regard women of his own class as even belonging to the same race of human beings as women *not* of his own class—that any outward display of emotion was more undesirable than a chronic disease bound to end fatally—that all niggers and Jews ought to be slaughtered and starved—that men who played the piano, sang, or acted should be kept out of decent clubs—that a woman's only real mission was to provide an heir for some man's estates—that a man's God, mother, and really-loved woman were subjects to be cherished in a metaphorical casket kept hidden in the archives of his own heart—and that conventional vices must be carried out in a conventional fashion.

And this, of course—this sending of flowers and other things to a stage-door, this sitting in the same stall for three nights in the same week, was a preliminary to perfectly conventional vice bound to be carried out in a perfectly conventional manner.

There was the girl—a fair, “flapper”-like, fascinating girl. The girl was on the stage, of course. There was the man (himself), a rich, ambitious man, under thirty-two. The man had never been in love. The man was ready to spend a good deal of money in the way other similarly-placed men spend a good deal of money. Within the next six years the man meant to marry some loved woman of his own class who would provide him with a splendid, cleanly-born, plucky little heir ; but until the loved woman of his own class appeared he was quite ready to devote a good deal of spare time and spare cash to some desirable woman of a class *not* his own.

It was the conventional way of following inclinations which had never fully made themselves manifest until that first night, two months ago, when he had sat in the stalls and watched a yellow-haired chorus girl who, by means of some devilishly unique skill all her own, had achieved the amazing triumph of not being exactly like every other yellow-haired chorus girl.

He had watched her, he had sent the conventional gifts round to the stage-door, and then just as the promise of an introduction had been secured a call to a river that seemed to want damming more than any other river in the world caused this necessary postponement of Sir Gilbert Frayle's introduction to Miss Cecile Clare Kissler, of the Duke of Carmine's Theatre, Shaftesbury Avenue.

But now if, on witnessing one entire performance of the new production, Sir Gilbert still found his conventional inclinations set in the same direction as they had been before the intervening of the Nile, he

would arrange that the postponed introduction was brought off without delay.

Bertie Byne would arrange it all—there was nothing of this sort which Bertie Byne couldn't arrange. Bertie was the universal brother of every girl on the musical comedy stage, and there is nobody like a brother for putting things on a comfortable footing with other people who are not brothers.

After the show Gilbert would ring up Bertie Byne—that is if his conventional inclinations still remained unchanged.

So Gilbert Frayle crossed the Circus and stepped between swing doors into the very middle of his destiny—for destiny *is* destiny, no matter if one particular section of it may last less than a week or more than ten years !

Destiny has no time limitations whatsoever.

CHAPTER II

WHEN THE CURTAIN WENT UP

AND there was Bertie Byne !

Gilbert was not surprised to see him, because Captain Bertie was one of those small, stout, perpetually-energetic men whose own activities appear to overcome all difficulties of time and space. Bertie might be dancing at a Continental State ball one evening, yet he would be bound to turn up in time for an important London crush the following afternoon. The speed-limits of boats and trams and cars seemed to have no significance where Bertie was concerned ; he could defy them all ; he could always manage to be anywhere and everywhere he wished whenever he wished. Bertie was ubiquitous, omnipresent, and any other long words which mean the same sort of thing.

“ Hullo ! ”

Bertie didn’t actually shout “ Hullo ! ” but he looked it, with an airy hand-waggle, and two minutes later he had scuttled down from a first-tier box to take temporarily the vacant stall at Gilbert’s side.

“ You’re the chap I wanted to see ! ” was his genial opening remark.

“ Good ! ” replied Gilbert.

"I'm going to the Dwarfs' and Giants' Costume Ball at Park Galleries to-morrow night. Will you come? Take tickets from me—I'm a personality—they let me tickle the funds—my honorary honesty is undiscussable!"

"Anybody going?"

"Everybody. I'm taking—who d'you think I'm taking, you dog?"

"My canine sagacity doesn't help me."

"Then it should. I'm taking the poor little kid and the black-eyed devil of a companion. I told her she'd got so damned quiet since the Normandy trip that she wants waking up."

"The little kid being—?"

"Cecile Clare K., of course, *mon chien!*"

"Ah! yes!"

"Well, you'll come along, won't you? The introduction can be brought off and the course of true love can begin its smooth running."

"H'm! Ha! ha!" Gilbert Frayle always laughed as if he were laughing under protest. "Yes—well—very likely. I'll tell you at the end of the show to-night."

"Right, old chap, right! Well, I'll scuttle now—got a deadly crowd in the box up there, but useful, my boy—useful in these days when the current value of every sovereign seems to have dropped to sixpence! See you later—so long!" And in much less space of time than it would have seemed possible to reach even the *foyer*, Bertie Byne was once more seated in the first-tier box, while Gilbert Frayle continued frowning at the shepherdess on the drop scene.

But a second later the painted Phyllis and her lambs glided up beyond reach of unjustifiable frowns, and the opening chorus had begun.

She wasn't—in one moment Gilbert saw that she wasn't—among the crowd of presumed North Pole dwellers awaiting the arrival of an aeroplane which was due to bring them a lady-president from the South.

They were singing the same old opening chorus with the old notes differently arranged, and with "North Pole" substituted for "Sunny Spain," "Gay Paree," or "Bonny Scotland," just as the case might be had it been different from what it was.

And they danced the same old dance with the same old steps more or less transposed; and they smiled the same old smiles, and they made the same old gestures, until from behind a painted canvas iceberg at the back of the stage appeared three North Pole village maidens who had been allotted posts as serving-maids to the Aeroplane Girl who was expected to arrive by the next east wind. One of the maidens was fair and slim, with a Roman nose; the second maiden was fair and slim, with a *rétrossé* nose; the third maiden was still fairer and a shade less slim, with a nose that was more inclined to be straight.

The third maiden was Miss Cecile Clare Kissler.

Gilbert Frayle didn't lean forward and he didn't frown any less than he had frowned at the shepherdess on the drop scene; but from that moment he kept his eyes on "Snowdina," and never allowed them to stray in the direction of "Iciana," "Frostalia," or any of the other frosted beauties of the presumed North.

She had improved. It was either that his conventional inclinations had become more pronounced or that she had become entirely attractive. In that white satin frock edged with white fur, and a tiny white fur cap worn atop the pale yellow glory of her hair, she looked—well, it was hard for a well-bred Englishman who always fought shy of adjectives even mentally to describe how she looked.

Likewise it was obvious that her importance had increased, for not only was it relegated to her to explain what preparations had been made for the coming of the Aeroplane Girl, but also when the Aeroplane Girl had actually arrived and descended it was "Snow-dina's" task to break into a little song which informed the distinguished visitor as to the methods and formulae of North Pole love affairs.

And the small song (to be followed in the second and third acts by two larger songs) was charmingly sung, with that particular air of demure, distracting, semi-expressionless coquetry which is so rarely achieved by any but French or American artistes.

The demureness of an English actress is always suggestive of suburban Sunday-schools.

Gilbert Frayle watched her—watched her all the while—and as he watched became conscious of a sense of acute irritation occasioned by the fact that never once had she glanced at him. For she *ought* to glance at him; she had always done so in the half-furtive, half-airy manner peculiar to young ladies engaged at theatres lesseed and managed by gentlemen with a keen regard for public morality and decorum; and there was no reason why she should not do so again.

Besides, there was that tiny note of thanks pushed away in one of the pigeon-holes of Gilbert's largest desk, and there were other small signs and small facts which had indicated hopefully that matters might be all right if Sir Gilbert Frayle wished them to be all right.

But to-night her baby-kitten eyes of blue never once shot across the footlights to reach his own. She only sang a little and acted a little, and appeared to have no thought for anything beyond the business of the boards.

Gilbert grew piqued and irritated, and—after the manner of men who grow piqued and irritated with a woman who is sufficiently young (she must be quite, *quite* young), sufficiently beautiful, and sufficiently independent of all devotion—his conventional inclinations increased with his annoyance.

He must *know* her, know her at once, and make the running before anyone else “established a firm foothold in the flower-filled garden of her young affections !” (Gilbert Frayle's thoughts could be extremely sour and extremely cynical when he was piqued and irritated. . . . There is an extraordinary similarity between a piqued lover and an unloved old maid—they should both be marked with the “danger” triangle in vivid scarlet !)

Yes, he must know Cecile Clare Kissler without any further delay at all. He had time and money, both of which needed a little intermittent wasting ; and he was ready to waste them both on the little American actress with the peach-sweet cheeks, cowslip-gold hair, and Cambridge-blue eyes.

“Bertie!” After the second act he had signalled to the fat little man in the first-tier box, and now—less than thirty seconds after the signal—he and the fat little man were standing together quenching thirsts which couldn’t in the least require quenching.

“Bertie, I’ll go to the Dwarfs’ and Giants’ Ball to-morrow.”

“Right, old boy, and I’ll introduce you to C. C. K. if you’ll take a couple of hundred Beukit Pyllamas off my hands!”

“With pleasure!” replied Gilbert; for after all, when a man’s income and capital have well passed certain midway limits, a couple of hundred or so shares quiescent in the matter of dividend don’t signify one way or the other.

Gilbert Frayle was quite ready to take the Beukit Pyllamas for the sake of knowing Cecile Clare Kissler without delay.

Evidently the Nile had done nothing whatever in quenching his enthusiasm!

CHAPTER III

AT "WILLY'S"

A MAN who looked like a picture without meaning to look like a picture, and whose proper place was on the walls of the National Gallery, seemed almost as busy as he had ever been before—which was saying a good deal when in the rear loomed rushing, tearing days, spent in royal and ducal palaces, at Ober Ammergau, and in pretty nearly every city of the world where the spirit of revelry or make-believe was permitted to invade.

But to-day had been a rush from opening time till now, when at three o'clock a royal princess had been bowed into her carriage. The royal princess had decided upon "Rose of Lancaster" as her costume for the great forthcoming ball at Sidmouth House, and designs must be set in hand at once.

He sighed—Willy Clarkson, the tawny-haired, tawny-bearded man who looked like a picture—sighed just a little wearily, and wondered if there would be time to snatch a cup of tea with "Wiggy" before the afternoon crowd in search of "rig-outs" for to-night's "Dwarfs' and Giants'" costume ball began to arrive.

But he was only allowed to wonder for twenty

seconds, because almost before he had finished bowing out the royalty of birth a great black car pulled up in front of the door, and Willy Clarkson was called upon to bow in the royalty of genius.

The lady's furs—a long and elegant chinchilla coat with a gargantuan muff to correspond—were amazing ; the lady's hat—larger than any hat had ever been before—was bewildering ; the perfume exhaled by the lady's carnations—which were fastened together in a great pink sheaf of scented glory—was passionately potent ; and the lady's voice—golden-sweet, rich with tears and ripe with laughter—was the only voice in the world !

“ Ah ! *mon cher Clarkson, je suis venu un moment pour voir les perruques !* ” she cried—at which request “ *cher Clarkson* ” forgot that he was weary and in need of tea while displaying half-a-dozen wigs which had been created specially for a new tragedy to be produced next month in Paris.

The lady used many adjectives—“ *merveilleux*,” “ *superbe*,” “ *ravissante*,” were among them—with a final eulogy to the effect that “ *ces cheveux là sont à moi et pas fournis par Clarkson mais par le Bon Dieu !* ”

Clarkson was gratified, and after pointing out one particular flowing wig of “ *très blonde cendre* ” (curiously resembling in colour his own short parted beard and curling moustaches)—a wig which earned Madame's comment of “ *Le perruque et magnifique, mon cher Clarkson* ”—he escorted her back to her car and returned to the shop.

Could there be now a moment of respite ? Possibly,

after a look-in at one of the trying-on rooms and a few directions given to the wigmakers below.

So Willy Clarkson looked in at a ground-floor room, and decided that an "Electricity" costume would require a second veiling of spangled gauze as well as an additional light on each shoulder before hurrying to the wigmaking department below.

Here four workmen held up four wigs mounted on wooden blocks, and while Willy Clarkson gesticulated in the region of his own head—giving rapid directions in English, French, and German all at the same time—the workmen patted and pulled and dragged in accordance with instructions.

That was done!—now there could be the cup of tea, and the frolic with Wiggy!

"*Phew! phew!*" whistles "Our Only Willy," to which summons there was cordial response from a fox-terrier—a fox-terrier who looks only one shade less distinguished as a cardboard Christmas calendar than he does in the bulkier form of canine flesh-and-blood.

So "Wiggy" and "Our Only Willie" went upstairs, past mountains of masks, past armies of black-frocked attendants, past myriads of strange, stuffed animals which knew no Zoo or tropical backwoods save the Zoo and tropical backwoods of Soho; past crowds of eager people pushing and fighting to be seen before other crowds of equally eager people; past everything, wild, weird, strange, mysterious and uncanny, which 4, Wardour Street alone holds and possesses, till at last an amazing top-floor room was reached.

Such a very beautiful and surprising top-floor room it was, full of everything rare and expensive and surprising that the beholder would not have expected to see

Electric-blue appeared to be the predominant note, yet there was a sub-scheme of some other colour, and the shades covering electric lights (which turned up at the most astonishing angles, and where it would seem absolutely unprecedented for electric lights to be) were red, which caused a blush-rose glow to be cast across a sideboard covered with masses of souvenir silver, a costly souvenir table, souvenir cushions, and everything else which was the due of a man who helped wise men and women to become temporary fools and to forget the tragedy of being themselves.

Oh, heaven ! how glorious to become a make-believe fool for even a few hours of a dreary life-time ! Of being a real, solid, conscientious, virtuous fool one may have grown weary ; but to be a fool behind a mask—a man transformed into a beast, a woman changed into a bewigged nymph, fairy, or witch—oh ! merciful respite from being a painstaking citizen with an uninspired taste for doing one's duty !

For masks and dominoes and wigs mean folly ; folly means youth—and youth means heaven !

“ Well, Wiggy, she was pleased with the ‘ *La Samaritaine* ’ *perruque*, wasn’t she ? ” observed “ Her Majesty’s Clarkson,” as he dropped a lump of sugar into his cup.

But before Wiggy could respond by anything more definite than a tail-wag and a cardboard-calendar grin, and before the milk could follow the sugar, someone knocked at the door and entered.

"Please, sir, could you see Miss Kissler?" enquired the black-frocked attendant, who was young, pretty, and deferential.

"*Mon cher Clarkson*" looked more pathetic than actually impatient.

Miss Kissler? Who was Miss Kissler? Oh! yes, Miss Cecile Clare Kissler of the Duke of Carmine's—American girl—private means—been to No. 4 several times before—was rigged out for a head-dress supper before she went away—of course he remembered Miss Kissler quite well.

"Very well—very well—I'll come!"—and leaving Wiggy to do as he thought best with a plate of bread-and-butter Mr. Clarkson left his sanctum of art and rest and hurried downstairs to the realms of business once more.

Where was Miss Kissler? Oh! there she was, examining the portrait-windows, on which royalties and celebrities were made to serve the same decorative purpose as saints on stained glass!—with all the wondering interest of a person paying his or her first visit to the Wardour Street home of make-believe.

And there was the black-haired companion—Mr. Clarkson remembered her quite well; she was intelligent, and had more than once suggested a quite useful idea.

As Mr. Clarkson approached, Miss Kray was looking intently at a particularly fine suit of armour; but Miss Kissler ceased examining the portrait-windows to meet his gaze without the faintest trace of recognition in her glance.

"Our Only Willy" felt surprised—he was not one

of the world's unfortunate nonentities who grow accustomed to being forgotten.

"Good afternoon, Miss Kissler—good afternoon," he said, with the air of a busy man who means to keep amiable in spite of his busy-ness.

Miss Kissler started and was looking faintly bewildered just as Miss Kray turned round and adjusted the situation.

"Good-day, Mr. Clarkson—I bet Miss Kissler's staring at you as if you were a ghost ! It's one of those cataleptic trances which come when people of limited brain power try to get through more than they ought to get through !" she said, laughing wickedly and gaily, while Miss Kissler joined in being amused at herself.

"I guess I was looking through Mr. Clarkson to find his guardian angel. How d'you do, Mr. Clarkson ? It's quite a long time since I've been around bothering you, isn't it ? But now I've come to ask you to do your very best to make me beautiful in a few hours' notice. I've just said I *will* go to the Dwarfs' and Giants' ball to-night, so I want you to fix me up right away ! Ha ! ha !" And with a soft little laugh that was unmistakably Yankee the young American actress from the Duke of Carmine's Theatre sat down in a high-backed carved oak chair.

"Her Majesty's Willy" made a suitable response, and immediately turned towards the stairs.

"Go right up !" whispered Miss Kray, whereat Miss Kissler frowned with the air of a person not quite knowing where she was being taken.

Miss Kray whispered again, and then Miss Kissler

went straight ahead into the Devonshire Room, where half-a-dozen prize costumes were set out on stands.

"My! Isn't this fine?" she cried, indicating a tawny-golden dress studded with tawny sequins, and trimmed with trails of chrysanthemums and asters.

Miss Kray moved close to her side and happened to nudge her elbow in passing.

"Yes, that was the one you admired last time you were here, wasn't it?" she answered carelessly.

Miss Kissler remembered that it was, but expressed an opinion that because she had admired something once there was no reason why she should not admire it again.

Mr. Clarkson courteously agreed with her, and, remembering the undrunk tea upstairs, hurried back to business.

"What about 'Spring'?" he suggested—then suddenly came an inspiration. He remembered something upstairs in the work-room—something which had only been finished half-an-hour previously, and which, owing to an onslaught of influenza, would not be required by the person for whom it had been made.

"A moment!" cried "Our Only Willy." "I will send Miss Weston down with a costume which ought to be the exact thing! Will you try it on, Miss Kissler, and then let me know what you think?"

"I will—yes—thanks very much," drawled "Cecile Clare," as the transforming genius of the world pushed open a sliding door and hurried away.

"Say, don't look at things as if you've never seen them before—remember you've been here quite half-

a-dozen times!" instructed Miss Kray directly they were alone.

"Of course I remember! I'm a genius for remembering what's never happened—I guess!" replied the cowslip-haired, peach-skinned young lady whose name figured on the Duke of Carmine's programme as "Miss Cecile Clare Kissler," and who always "guessed" and "reckoned" and "calculated" with painstaking frequency.

Pauline Kray nodded, showed her vividly-white teeth in a smile, and patted her companion's arm with a touch which contained the lingering elements of real feminine liking and cordiality.

"You're the cutest proposition I've come across on this side, my dear!" was her reply, spoken with such transatlantic heartiness that it might almost have reached the ears of a black-frocked young lady who at that moment entered the room with four garments flung over one arm and carrying two garments in the other hand.

"Now, I hope you've got something very cunning to fix me up in," drawled "Cecile Clare Kissler," looking like a humanised Persian kitten of the most fascinatingly grave and demure variety.

"Yes, madam, I think so—Mr. Clarkson thinks you'll be very pleased with this—and there's not likely to be another one in the room," answered Miss Weston, holding out the four garments and the two garments with which she was armed.

Miss Kissler turned them over, then uttered a little scream that was dangerously British in *timbre*.

"Oh! but no—I guess—" (she "guessed" very

quickly after the British scream) " —I guess I couldn't wear *those* at a ball ! "

" Surely, yes, madam—the coat, you see, comes almost down to the knees ! "

" Cecile Clare " looked ruefully at the coat.

" Don't be silly, Cecile—there's nothing more startling about this than your riding-kit. It's the very thing ! " interposed Miss Kray emphatically.

" Cecile " turned over one garment which is always spoken of in the plural.

" No, I suppose not—but riding is different from dancing," she murmured.

" Well, won't you try it on ? " suggested Miss Weston.

" Yes, even your parson poppa couldn't disown you for trying it on ! " broke in Miss Kray ; whereupon, acting under pressure, " Cecile Clare " proceeded to divest herself of a black velvet frock, a black velvet coat, a colossal black velvet hat, and a gigantic feather ruffle, above which rose her little pink-and-white face like an unexpected flower breaking through a dense unpromising mass of leaves.

There she stood, one of the most effective combinations of Nature and Convention—a very young, very lovely, white-skinned woman wearing blue satin corsets !

" Now put on the others," hustled Miss Kray.

One by one " the others " were put on, till at last when top boots and huge flopping felt hat adorned the extremities of " Miss Cecile Clare Kissler " the costume was complete.

" Cecile Clare " looked in the glass—looked seriously

—looked solemnly ; then gradually a slow, unfolding smile broke across her face—as the wakening summer sun breaks across the grey sleeping mysteries of the night.

She was gay—she was delighted—she was reckless !

“ It’s very go-ey, but it’ll do—I guess ! ” she said.

And that settled it. “ Cecile Clare Kissler ”—recently returned to the Duke of Carmine’s Theatre after a brief holiday spent on the Continent—was to attend the Dwarfs’ and Giants’ Costume Ball dressed in the dashing attire of a Western Cowboy.

CHAPTER IV

“ I AM—MYSELF ! ”

A VERY smart man jumped out of a taxi which had pulled up in front of 600, Southwest Street—600 Southwest Street being a particularly select jeweller's establishment, above which rose five floors of super-elegant furnished flats.

The very smart man was Colonel Raythe (late of the Third Bessex Rifles), who had always been very smart, but who, now that his beautiful moustache and beautiful hair were silvering white, while his fresh-coloured, handsome face still remained the face of a boy, was smarter than ever. His eyes, too, were so frank and pleasant and clearly blue ; his shoulders were splendidly square and broad, his manner imparted a sense of joy and optimism ; his clothes were the “ final cry,” and his boots were the “ last word.”

Everybody always felt better and jollier for knowing Colonel George Raythe, and a certain bankrupt theatrical manager was reported to have said that, though officially he had been declared a pauper, one half-hour's chat and drink with George Raythe had changed his outlook to that of a millionaire.

George Raythe could change most paupers and

failures into temporary millionaires and celebrities by means of a short talk and a long drink.

After paying the driver very little above his legitimate fare, yet leaving him with satisfied sensations such as might be enjoyed by the best-tipped taxi-chauffeur in London, Colonel Raythe entered a narrow door, went up in a narrow lift, and then rang the bell of another and still narrower door.

There was a longer wait than there ought to have been before a buxom, shrewd-eyed woman answered the summons.

"Is Miss Kissler at home?—or Miss Kray?" enquired Colonel Raythe.

"No, sir, not at present, but I expect them here each minute," replied Margot, with that particular air of respectful geniality which the English servant never quite knows how to achieve.

"Oh, I'm sorry they're out—"

"But will you not wait, sir—I should say it would be best to wait, sir!"

"Thanks. I'm rather inclined to agree with you—yes, I will!" and, having made up his mind to take the advice which inclination prompted him to take, Colonel Raythe stepped into one of the prettiest flats in London.

Until a person became intimately acquainted with the geography of 600, Southwest Mansions it would be quite impossible to say where one room ended and another room began, or if a room was the hall, or if what appeared to be the hall was a room, or how to get in or how to get out or anything about it.

But Colonel George Raythe, having been a frequent

visitor during the past six months, was quite sure of his bearings ; therefore, after leaving a brilliantly glossy top hat in the first section of the flat, he entered the second section, where chintz, walls, and ceiling strewn with pink roses—and mountains of cushions—and stacks of flowers—and crowds of silver-framed photographs—and a sea-green carpet sprayed with more pink roses, all gave evidence that the drawing-room had been reached.

Colonel Raythe sat down. Margot brought him illustrated journals (in which three new portraits of Miss Cecile Clare Kissler were reproduced), a glass of cherry brandy, and a crystal and gold box of cigarettes, displaying as she did so all that cheerful hospitality which it is so pleasant to display when being hospitable with other people's possessions.

Colonel Raythe lit a cigarette, but, finding the cherry brandy too entirely feminine and unsophisticated for his taste, pushed the glass away, and was just about to open the first of the illustrated papers when a bell rang, Margot hurried, and the sound of American dropped cadences reached his ears.

"I'm afraid it's a case of 'here I am again'!" he called out, with the cheeriness of a man who is always sure of his welcome everywhere.

"Cecile Clare" came straight into the room, and Pauline Kray followed.

"How nice! I was hoping you might look in!" answered "Cecile," shaking hands prettily and almost affectionately. For it was impossible to encounter Colonel George Raythe without putting a certain amount of affection into the greeting ; besides,

"Cecile Clare" had from the very first scented a possible romance, and when one woman imagines an embryo love-affair between another woman whom she likes and a man whom she likes, but doesn't want for herself, there is no limit to her cordiality.

"Well, my dear, you see you didn't hope in vain!" replied Colonel Raythe, giving a fraternal-cum-paternal pressure to her small-sized, plump, and manicured hand. "I knew if I wasn't wanted I should be shown the mat, so I came, and —"

"The mat's outside!" interposed "Cecile Clare" demurely—at which Colonel George laughed the jolliest laugh in London, while "Cecile Clare" proceeded to divest herself of big hat, big scarf, and narrow coat.

Colonel George watched the leisurely proceedings more closely than a casual observer would have imagined him to be watching.

"Well, we've been to Clarkson's, and this young woman here showed herself to be a young woman bereft of all duplicity and resource. She looked at 'Willy' as though he were a novelty just put on the market, and admired all sorts of things that presumably *she* had admired five months ago!" said Pauline Kray, who had watched Colonel Raythe while he was watching "Cecile Clare."

"Well, I don't know, I think I do very well! I'm *always* pretending, and I'm always on the look-out to know what hasn't happened, so if I do sometimes let go for a minute I oughtn't to be scolded!" broke in "Cecile" petulantly.

"Of course you oughtn't, my dear—Miss Pauline

is quite a bully, isn't she?" Pauline laughed a little, "Cecile" laughed a little, but there remained a temporary atmosphere of seriousness.

"You know," "Cecile" went on, "there are days when I get suddenly so frightened that I feel I must stop it! Think of it—just *think*—" (for a moment she had dropped the Yankee drawl, which by means of continual practice had become almost a natural mannerism, to speak more rapidly than it had ever been her custom to speak) "—just imagine what it must feel like to live in a world of new people when only two of those people know that one isn't what one pretends to be! If it were not for you, Colonel, and for Pauline I sometimes think I—I should almost forget myself that I *am* myself and not somebody else! When I feel the walls of make-believe growing so high that I can't even see over the top it is such a relief to turn to either of you and say: '*I'm not "Cecile Clare Kissler"—I'm "Anna Merrick"!*' You both knew the real Cecile—you knew that her hair was fairer than my hair before—"

"Say, my dear, I guess you're beating the record for breaking promises to-day! Didn't you promise me that you wouldn't give way to this morbid kind of talk? Didn't we agree that not even when we were by ourselves would we leave off playing the game?" And as Pauline Kray interposed with a touch of real strength and real sternness in her manner "Cecile" dropped her head like a scolded child.

Colonel Raythe gave her a genial pat on the shoulder,

"Miss Pauline is right, my dear," he said, also speaking with a touch of earnestness that was sincere.

" When we've got a little game of sham to play we must never leave off playing it even to ourselves ! We must tell ourselves that we are what we pretend to be, till at last if we go on long enough we ourselves shall believe what we pretend ! There ! Philosophy and advice free ! "

" Not only free—" (here " Cecile " picked up her hat and furs and stood before him in an attitude of bewitching insolence) " —but unasked for as well, I guess ! "

It was over. That feeble, foolish outburst of half-hysterical weakness was over now, and a momentarily assertive personality was once again submerged and conquered.

Of course she *was* " Cecile Clare Kissler "—she *had* been born in Iowa—her father *was* an Episcopalian clergyman—she *did* possess a wealthy godmother who kept her supplied with funds—and this present life of rush and glitter and light and paint and powder and songs and supper *was* the life which she had come over to England for the purpose of living !

Because there happened to be a smart, genial moustached man and a black-haired, cute, cautious woman who knew the truth, that was no reason why—

No, no, *this* was the truth ! There *was* no other truth except that she was Cecile Clare Kissler living with a companion-chaperon in a smart S.W. flat ! She *was* " Cecile Clare "—everybody should call her " Cecile Clare "—she would call herself " Cecile Clare "—she would think of herself as " Cecile Clare " !

And when all this had been going on for—say, another twelve hours, she would actually *be* "Cecile Clare"!

Directly the "*I guess*" was spoken in exactly the tone in which it ought to be spoken Pauline laughed approvingly, while Colonel Raythe applauded with encouraging heartiness. The delinquent had been scolded, the delinquent had amended her ways—it was unlikely she would offend again just yet awhile.

"Now, if I've got to be a pearl of beauty at the ball to-night, and if there's got to be any duke-snaring brought off, I reckon I'd better go into the arms of Morpheus for half-an-hour!" said "Cecile Clare" when she had fully re-established herself as "Cecile Clare."

"The ball? Oh! yes, the Dwarfs' and Giants'? You're going to that, are you?" replied Colonel Raythe, with just one more touch of heartiness than was quite in the picture—the sort of heartiness which might suggest that he didn't entirely enjoy what he was being hearty about.

"Yes, Bertie Byne made us go," responded Pauline.

"Ah! yes—well—I expect there'll be a jolly crowd. Tremayne and Gappett are both going, I know, and Gil—and all the rest of that crew. I may turn in myself in time for breakfast!"

"Then if you turn in you must come right up to me and say, '*Cecile Clare Kissler, you're the belle of the ball.*' It don't matter if you don't think it—it's just one of those nice li-l-l-e things that's got to be said!" And having given her instructions with the air of a person accustomed to having them carried out "Cecile Clare" balanced the huge hat on the side

of her head, swaggered out of the door, and passed through various exits and entrances to her own bedroom at the other end of the flat.

It was a fine chance of leaving Pauline alone with the Colonel, and for them to lead up to telling each other that they were in love with each other.

It was all very well for Pauline to speak of Colonel Raythe as "an old friend who'd promised to look after them over here"!—"Cecile Clare" knew better—she knew all about those "old friends!" who look after black-haired ladies who are still quite young enough to be attractive!

Dear Colonel! "Cecile Clare" just loved the Colonel! She had "just loved" him since the day of their introduction—that first bewildering morning after she and Pauline had returned from Paris to take up their quarters at 100, Southwest Street. She felt him to be her good, safe friend and adviser just as (according to Pauline) he had been the good friend and adviser of the real Cecile Clare Kis—

There! once again those dangerous straying thoughts! They mustn't stray—they shouldn't stray any more. *She* was Cecile Clare Kissler—she *was*—she *was*—she *was*! And here was the little black cat charm to wear slung around her neck on a tiny chain of gold, and hidden tucked away between her corsets and her heart. It would bring her luck—the very best of good, good luck!

"Just you take that right along with you and hold tight, my dear! I guess it'll be a mascot between me and you—a kind of link to give Anna Merrick and Cecile Clare Kissler one soul between them!"

That's what she had said. That's what the cowslip-haired American girl had said on that last morning when—

No, no, *NO* ! There hadn't *been* any last morning—how could there be any last morning when she (the "Western Cowboy" girl, who would dance to-night at the Dwarfs' and Giants' ball) was herself—had always been herself—when *she* was Cecile Clare Kissler playing "Snowdina" at the Duke of Carmine's Theatre, Shaftesbury Avenue, London ?

It was *her* portrait which filled whole pages of *The Leaflet*, *The Chatterer*, *The Sceptre*, and half-a-dozen other gallant illustrated papers which are always ready to star histrionic youth and beauty—particularly when that said histrionic youth and beauty is of the dollar-decked variety from "over the ditch" !

She was not masquerading—she was herself—herself !

And everything which belonged to her was hers—except perhaps the friendship of Colonel Georgie, who, being "in the know," might possibly extend kindness and support for the sake of Pauline and—and someone else !

But the fraternal chumminess of Bertie Byne was *hers*!—those heavy-scented flowers which every night found their way to the tiny first-floor dressing-room were *hers*!—the applause which always greeted the silly little songs in the first and third acts was *hers*—the portraits in the papers were *hers*—the supper and motoring and Sunday invitations were all sent to *her*—the strange cards brought round to the stage door were brought to *her*—the preying human sharks who sent them intended their preliminary intentions

only for *her*—the dear white riding-school horse which always gave a welcoming whinny when she approached was offering a greeting of equine affection to *her*—it was all to *her*—for *her* !

And if it should ever so happen that a little white mouse called Love nibbled open an inner door of the House of Chance, why, then the amazing treasures within would belong to *her*—only, only to *her* !

CHAPTER V

A "WESTERN COWBOY" FROM "WILLY'S"

GILBERT FRAYLE was neither a monkey, a brigand, nor a Marc Anthony. He was just a modern young man invested with the minimum of undignified absurdity by means of wearing a modern Court suit instead of aspiring to any zoological, historical, or mythological disguise.

Certainly it was unpleasant to be dressed in *levée* attire when he was not attending a *levée*; but, after all, as untrousered calves were not—in his case—a sartorial tragedy, the modern Court suit was quite the best concession which he could have made to the rules laid down for all those attending the Dwarfs' and Giants' costume ball.

So less than half-an-hour after midnight Sir Gilbert Frayle made his way through the crowded rooms of the Park Galleries in search of Bertie Byne.

Where *was* Bertie? Had "Our Only Willy" furnished Bertie with a new nose and transformed him into that cloaked "Shylock" who was looking temporary love into the eyes of a buxom "Sans Gêne"? Or had "Our Only Willy" provided distinguished horns and elegant hoofs, thus making Bertie into what every man under

twenty-five likes to think he is ? Or was a Wardour Street tail the appendix which——

“ Hullo ! dear old chap, hullo-a-lo-a-lo ! ”

Gilbert looked round. A Teddy Bear was speaking —a genial, plump little Teddy Bear warranted not to hug or to beg for buns.

Byne had become transformed into Bruin—Bertie Byne was a “ Teddy Bear ! ”

Gilbert laughed shortly, but, like all other men of his own particular type, was not to be lured into displaying either much surprise or much amusement.

Bertie was a Teddy Bear. Well, then, for so long as Bertie wished to remain a Teddy Bear he must be accepted as a Teddy Bear ! That's all there was in it.

“ Now, come along and I'll introduce you,” said the T. B. ; and putting a brown paw through Gilbert's arm, he led him out of one gallery into another gallery where at the further end was a bank of palms and a circular green velvet covered seat.

But where was she ?

A group of people—a tall “ Snowdrop ” and a tall “ San Toy,” conversing with a large boy and a little boy attired in costumes which would doubtless explain themselves when the wearers turned round. But nowhere the little yellow-haired American girl who——

“ Sir Gilbert Frayle, may I do you the very good turn of presenting you to Miss Cecile Clare Kissler—the star which shines more brightly than any other shining star at the Duke of Carmine's ? ”

It was Bertie the Bear who spoke, and as he concluded the flamboyant introduction the little boy who

had been talking to the tall "Snowdrop" turned round.

But the boy wasn't a boy—the boy was a girl who smiled seriously and gazed steadily—the boy was "Cecile Clare Kissler," who, from the other side of the footlights, had been the inspiration of Gilbert Frayle's conventional inclinations for over four months.

Gilbert bowed just a shade less disagreeably than he would have bowed to a woman of his own class, and decided that she was quite three times lovelier off the stage than she appeared to be on the stage.

And that was saying a good deal !

"I guess it's you that Mr. Bertie Byne made me save a waltz for!" she remarked, with an air of such completely unconscious assurance that even Gilbert Frayle was moved to wonder, contempt, and admiration.

Not a maidenly flutter, not the hint of a blush, not one tiny glance of coy comprehension to show that regular attendance in the stalls, flowers, visiting-cards, etc., etc., etc., were remembered.

Heavens ! an actress like that, decided Gilbert, ought to be playing "lead," with a salary of two hundred a week.

"Yes, I am the individual for whom Bertie asked you to save *every* waltz," replied Gilbert, looking down at her and then almost smiling beneath his protective moustache.

Very, very wide "Cecile Clare" opened her astoundingly blue eyes.

"Every waltz ! My ! what a set-to there would be among all the boys who are in love with me !" she cried.

At this Gilbert emitted a sound that might have been nearly a laugh.

She was extraordinarily charming, even for a stage-girl—and every stage-girl has some sort of charm of her own.

"Oh ! let the boys have their set-to !" he answered. "May I ?" and with the four-lettered query he offered his arm.

"Cecile Clare" looked still more astonished, but took the arm, for Gilbert Frayle was one of those men who rarely offer anything to a woman which is not taken.

He waltzed normally, he would never infringe upon the dulness of court regulations by reversing, he never made any spontaneous gyration which might suggest that the madness of music had got into his blood ; in fact, he danced as a gentleman should dance—without recklessness or imagination.

"Ripping waltz !" he observed, glancing down at the boy-girl partner whom his right arm was encircling without pressure.

"Why, y-e-s—what is it called ?" she drawled.

That was amusing. Gilbert laughed, ceased dancing, and steered towards the circular seat under the palms.

"You're a great little hypocrite, aren't you ?" he said, looking at her fully and quizzically.

"Me ? I guess I'm the most candid thing ever made ! Away at home my second sister Ruth—ah ! she's such a beautiful girl—you just should see her !—yes, er—Ruth used to call me Candid Peel, because I always told the truth ! No, you

mustn't laugh—it's not kind! But why am I what you said I was?"

"Well, aren't you a hypocrite when you pretend you don't recognise the 'Caramel Sailor' waltz after being in the piece for a couple of months?"

For a second "Cecile Clare" looked dazed, then slowly her lips curved like a flower-bud opening to the sun of June and she smiled.

"Why, yes, I guess I am a hypocrite—and I think it's a very nice thing to be!" was her unruffled reply, made while, without any definite expression in his sombre grey eyes, Gilbert Frayle watched the curving of those flower-bud lips.

His conventional inclinations were growing stronger every minute. He was very keenly attracted—more so than he expected—more so, possibly, than he quite wished to be.

But of course it would soon wear off—these sort of attractions can always be relied upon to do that.

"Well, it may be a very nice thing from your point of view to be a hypocrite, but I'm not sure that I appreciate it so much. I don't mind your pretending to have forgotten a waltz, but I seriously object to your pretending to have forgotten me!"

"Cecile Clare"—who was idly fingering a thin gold chain which hung about her neck and which appeared to have got entangled with one of the buttons of the "cow-boy" shirt—looked at him with wide-eyed wonder.

"But why should I remember you?" she demanded guilelessly. (This chain was tiresome, and the charm

to which it was attached scraped and rubbed the softness of her skin.)

“ Mainly because I’ve been most trustworthy in my perseverance, and also because—” (here the chain became disentangled, while a black enamel cat with emerald eyes and a diamond collar jerked out through the stitched opening of the buttoned blouse) “ —and because when I sent you that animal which you are now good enough to be wearing I enclosed a clearly-engraved visiting-card just as I did when—”

It was very rarely that “ Cecile Clare ” interrupted, for she did not belong to that tiring type of young womanhood which always has three times as much to say as any one wants to hear. But on this occasion she broke into Gilbert Frayle’s sentence.

“ But was it you?—you—you sent the good-luck charm—you—the flowers——? ” Then she paused again in bewilderment, while Gilbert’s eyebrows met in a swift impatient frown. She was overdoing the innocence and ignorance and forgetfulness: it was a pity to spoil a somewhat piquant pose by overdoing it.

“ Yes, I’m afraid I am responsible,” was his casual response. He felt casual just then. Perhaps, after all, this conventional game of folly *was* a foolish, futile one to play. Such waste of time when eventually there would be a good sweet woman of his own class who—

“ Well, then, I think—” (He started from his reverie of wisdom, for the little stage girl was speaking and her voice had grown softer again: it was a baby’s voice once more) “ —I just think the cat is the cutest cat that ever wore a collar and spurned milk—also the

flowers were the sweetest flowers that ever went to any dressing-room—also the person who sent them is——”

She stopped short, and broke into a little laugh that sounded like a young dove's call, while Gilbert Frayle bent forward and looked more eager than he had ever looked before.

“ And what is the person who sent them ? ” Her answer *mattered* ! Heavens ! the answer of a little stage girl who wore breeches and top boots when she ought to have been wearing skirts and French-heeled shoes mattered intensely !

“ Well, *he* is—— ” She looked at him critically, she looked at him laughingly, she looked at him dreamily ; then a half-startled, wholly-unconscious seriousness—something which seemed apart from lime-light and masks and masquerade—crept into her gaze.

“ Yes ? ”

“ Well, I'll—I'll tell you what *he* is some other time ! ”

The words in themselves were full of every promise, of every invitation, but somehow Gilbert Frayle refrained from putting upon them any construction other than that which might have been intended by some good woman of his own class.

She would “ tell him some other time ”—which meant that she was too girlishly shy to tell him now ! And yet—and yet—there was the leather case, the contents of that case, and a little letter which——

In a second Gilbert Frayle left off thinking of her as a good woman of his own class. She was yellow-haired—she was on the stage—he would ask her out to supper !

"Will you let me come round and see you--to fix up some motoring or something?" he asked suddenly. It was quite permissible to go ahead without any delay at all--only what a girl on the stage would expect and almost demand.

Once again she turned and looked at him steadily.

"Why, yes, if you're a friend of Mr. Byne's it must be all right! Yes, come right along one day and have tea with me," was her gently-drawled reply.

"'One day' shall be to-morrow if it's all the same to you," answered Gilbert, glancing down at her smart, perfectly-detailed costume and feeling suddenly irritated.

Why couldn't the little fool have put on skirts instead of those--those--(he inserted a mental adjective)--those other things? If a man felt interested in a woman it was in a woman *as* a woman, and not as a make-believe emasculated boy.

Of course the idea wasn't in the least new, and at a dozen other fancy-dress balls Gilbert had seen a dozen other girls who had made temporary and sartorial changes in the matter of sex. But this particular girl--well, it irritated him that she should be wearing very manly little top boots when he wanted her to be wearing very womanly high-heeled satin shoes. And it irritated him that she should be wearing a stiff boyish coat when he wanted her to be wearing a soft girlish bodice--and it irritated him most of all that beneath the decorously-concealing coat she should be wearing perfectly-cut masculine breeches when he wanted her to be wearing a delicately draped chiffon skirt.

If any woman of his own class had elected to wear

—but here he pulled himself up and smiled very grimly beneath the concealing moustache.

Why should his thoughts even temporarily stray in the direction of women of his own class when the diversion of the hour, or perhaps of the week, of the month —of the next six months possibly!—was a yellow-haired girl on the stage?

It was foolish—as well as risky—to draw unnecessary comparisons of that description!

CHAPTER VI

AN AFTERNOON CALL

THE next afternoon Gilbert Frayle rang the bell at Flat C, 000, Southwest Mansions, feeling as he did so that if, after all, he was a fool, it was only evidencing his folly in quite a normal and approved fashion.

A flat—a fair-haired stage girl—oh, yes, of course it was quite in order !

“ Miss Kissler at home ? ” he enquired, when Margot had opened the door and stood beaming cordially on the mat. Things were beginning to be “ *all-right* ” now ! Just as Margot felt they ought to be !

“ In one moment, sir, or two moments, Miss Kissler come back from riding. Will you please come in and wait, sir ? ”

So Gilbert Frayle went in and waited just as Colonel Raythe had gone in and waited—and just as every man will go in and wait so long as a woman can make him feel quite sure that if he doesn’t want to waste his time a dozen somebody-elses will be much more than willing to waste theirs. That is the way of these things.

In the drawing-room he waited—in the drawing-room where the delicate softness of pink and green and the straying patterns of rosy roses and the sensuous perfume of imported flowers all suggested the personality

of a girl who lived among all the beautiful follies of existence ; and after some moments, the hard, wholesome, outdoor part of his nature succumbed to the enervating influences of the hour.

Gradually he felt more and more unconsciously convinced that women and light loves and soft colours and soft cushions were the things which mattered ; while great iron-bound ships and high iron-framed bridges and endless iron-railed tracks were details of exaggerated significance.

Iron !—iron !—who wants the cruel hardness of iron, when little white hands and sweet red lips are soft as the satin velvet petal of a flower ?

And then she came to him—found him in this mood, waiting for her to come and reign as the young queen of his light love hours.

He rose conventionally and looked at her—looked almost scowlingly, for once again she had cheated him out of her womanhood !

And this time there was actually a hard felt hat added to the coat and the trousers and the top boots—a different and not “Western Cowboy” coat and trousers and top boots, but still garments cut so that even if the glory of her girlhood was revealed the potent sex-influence of draperies was absent.

And, if it were only known, it is often the draperies which achieve more than the woman herself !

“ My ! you look as if you’d eaten limes and lemons before they got ripe ! Why are you so cross ? ” exclaimed and enquired “ Cecile Clare ” as she stood before him jauntily tapping the toe of one boot with her cane.

"Haven't you got any gowns, Miss Kissler?" demanded Gilbert, using her name in order to appear more polite and to sound more disagreeable.

"Why, yes, enough to stock half the stores in New York!"

"Don't you ever wear them then?"

"I guess—yes! Why?"

"Because so far I've only seen you in bifurcated garments and coats!"

After "Cecile Clare" had stared steadily for a few seconds she smiled half a small smile.

"Well, I was a 'Cowboy' last night, and cowboys never wear skirts, and I've been riding to-day, and American girls always ride this way. But—" she paused long enough to think out a great question—"but if you like I'll change while Margot makes the tea!"

* "Do—it'll be delightful of you if you will!"

"I reckon, then, I'll try to be delightful. It's no good making oneself disliked if one can make oneself liked, is it?" And without waiting to consider the question further "Miss Kissler" took her exit through a door situated exactly opposite the door by which she had made her entry.

Gilbert was left alone with his own sensations and the chintz roses until Margot entered with tea, a few savoury sandwiches, and a great many rich cakes. Gilbert looked at the cakes with aloofness and contempt, and wondered why they were there.

No girl with any experience of the opposite sex (and of course "Cecile Clare's" experience was limitless) would dream of providing mountains of cakes for a

man's afternoon tea ; and no girl with a taste for Pommery and Heidsieck (and of course "Cecile Clare's" taste was well-trained by custom) would dream of eating them herself.

Perhaps they were just part of the pose.

Sir Gilbert waited, wondered if he might smoke, laughed at himself for wondering, but at the same time refrained from doing so, then got up and examined a portrait that was half hidden behind a miniature folding screen standing on a shelf.

The portrait represented "Cecile Clare," but a slightly less delicate and ideally grave "Cecile Clare" than his hostess appeared to-day. Gilbert bent closer and put up an eyeglass which actually had its moments of usefulness ; then, just as he was about to dislodge the photograph, there sounded the very faint click of a well-latched door.

He turned round and "Cecile Clare" looked at him without smiling.

"Ah!"

Never would so expansive an exclamation have been permitted to leave his lips had he been able to arrest the ejaculatory outburst in time. But he wasn't able to arrest it in time, and he breathed that "*Ah!*" because, as a girl, he found her so passionately and intensely desirable.

Every trace of boyishness was gone—every hint of perfect tailoring and top boots.

There were the satin shoes which his soul had demanded — shell-coloured, like moonlight or a darkened pearl, with astounding heels ; and there were the draperies which cling about the heart

of a man like siren arms of *ninon-de-soie* or chiffon.

She was an opal girl—ten minutes had changed her from a tailored boy into an opal girl with a hint of apricot pink somewhere hidden beneath a clinging sheath of moonlight grey, and a breath of water-blue blown across and breaking out here and there.

And there were trickles of tiny absurd rose-buds in blue and pink silk drifting somewhere near the high-set line of her beautifully small waist, while the pale primrose of her hair seemed to supply the one last need in a melting scheme of tints stolen from the setting of a spring-day sun.

“ I know this is more of an almost-evening frock than anything else, but as cloth and things like that seemed to be getting on your nerves I thought you should have the most different sort of thing I could find,” she said, with a touch of that quaint unexpected grammar which is so essentially American.

“ It’s the—er—the—” (he held himself in check ; it would be appalling to break into expansiveness in the presence of a yellow-haired stage girl) “ —it’s quite the most effective frock I’ve ever seen ! ”

“ Oh ! I *am* glad to hear you say that—this is absolutely my own—I really chose it and got it new myself ! ” she cried, speaking more impulsively than usual.

“ Well, don’t you choose all your frocks and get them new ? ”

She paused—looked fully at him—and then sat down near the tea table.

“ Why, of course—but sometimes I’ll buy a ready-

made model that I see on a stand. And when I do that it isn't quite like a new frock chosen by myself, is it ? " she answered when the pause was over.

Gilbert agreed that it was not. He was in the mood to agree with practically anything she might say, and the lullaby of the cushions and the rose-strewn chintz and the perfumed flowers was sending his argumentative faculties to sleep. He didn't want to argue or to disagree—he only wanted to look at her as a man wants to look at the one woman who is going to set his life in or out of order.

And not the least perturbed did she appear by his glance—it was the most perfect serenity he had ever seen.

After a moment's pause for reflection ("Cecile Clare" often paused to reflect about something) she appeared to remember certain obligations in connection with the tea-table, but her hospitality was of the smooth, unemotional description which frequently creates the necessity for a guest to look after himself.

In this case Gilbert found that he would be given an airily-poured-out cup of tea, but if he wanted to sample the savoury sandwiches he must be prepared personally to supply his own wants.

"Cecile Clare Kissler" was not one of those women who kill a man's manhood by looking after him and seeing that he's got everything he wants or ever has wanted or is ever likely to want. Without thinking about it or giving the subject any consideration whatever, she helped towards the upkeep of her own sex's decaying sovereignty by keeping placid and undisturbed so far as masculine wants were concerned.

"What are all these cakes for?" enquired Gilbert, when he had taken a sandwich without being asked.

"They're just for me, in case I should want to eat them," replied "Cecile Clare," breaking off a small portion of one which was brown on the top, pink in the middle, and green underneath.

"But you don't want to eat them, do you?"

"Oh, yes—sometimes."

"I thought the cake taste was out of date."

"Oh, no, I don't think so—not with people who don't drink. I'm a teetotaler, and teetotalers always eat cakes some time or other—Pauline says it's their consolation!"

"But why do you want consoling?—why are you a teetotaler?"

"Because poppa brought me up that way, I guess!"

"Your father's a parson, isn't he?"

"Cecile Clare" looked at him and made a little movement that served as an affirmative nod.

"And do you—" he pulled himself up; it was absurd to feel interested in fathers and mothers and family histories of girls on the stage.

"Do I—what?"

The query came suddenly, and he felt momentarily nonplussed.

"Oh! I forget—really I forget what I was going to say."

"Do you?" And by that small, simple response Sir Gilbert Frayle knew that he was being called a liar.

But it didn't matter, of course—why on earth should it matter?

Suddenly he put down his cup and leant forward in

the engulfing chair covered with rose-strewn chintz—leant forward in order to make a definite effort to get matters placed upon their proper footing. Somehow just at present they seemed a little out of gear.

"I thought we were never going to meet, didn't you?" he said, dropping his voice as voices are dropped insensibly when intrigue is in the air.

"Cecile Clare" laid aside the piece of cake which she had only once nibbled, and then, with the air of a dainty Persian kitten bored by the subject of food—

"Well, I guess it would be nice and modest and lady-like if I said I hadn't just thought about it, wouldn't it?" she answered, smiling divinely now—one of those smiles which build for love a new castle every time they are smiled.

"No, it wouldn't, because I—well, I shouldn't believe it, don't you know!"

"Then if you wouldn't believe it there wouldn't be much use my saying it, would there?"

"Not a bit—not a bit when I—I—" (heavens! he was growing boyishly eager and hurried now! He might have been twenty, and talking to a girl of his own class among the home orchard trees!) "—when I've kept your little letter!"

"What letter?" she asked unguardedly.

"Oh! about that bangle arrangement you never wear."

"You mean—the—diamonds?"

"Yes, well—er—they weren't exactly paste!"

"Of course they weren't—they are beautiful, but I—I'm going to talk to you about those another time! I—I—don't want to talk about that yet!"

"Neither do I—I only want you to stop pretending that you don't know me, and that you've never thought about me and—and——"

"Of course I'll stop," interrupted "Cecile Clare," so softly that it didn't sound in the least like an interruption. "I only pretended because I—well, it always makes a little change to pretend, doesn't it?"

Coming from any other girl in the world (or almost any other girl!) such irreverent childishness would have been little less than idiotic; but in the case of "Cecile Clare"—serene, soft-tinted, and young, wearing a spring-sunset-tinted gown, and eating cake in the pretty aloof fashion of a person who sets no store by food whatever—the little outbreak of disconnected nonsense was enchanting.

It didn't mean anything—it was not meant to mean anything—and in these days when most women are so much cleverer than any man wants them to be the fascination of foolishness is hopelessly compelling.

"Will you come to supper with me to-morrow?" he asked almost ardently. It was this fascinating stupidity that had made him ardent.

"Yes—if you like?"

"And will you let me motor you down to my place at Meadoweslow on Sunday?"

"Oh, yes—if you like—thank you!"

"If I like! Well, don't you think——"

But there was no more opportunity for Sir Gilbert Frayle to ask Miss "Cecile Clare Kissler" what she thought or didn't think, because just as he was about to lose his head a week or ten days before he ought to

lose it the door opened and Pauline Kray entered the room.

The entry was not by any means unpropitious, because if a man loses his head before he quite means to lose it there are ten chances to one he'll find it again without any difficulty.

And it's a pity when particularly sleek and well-brushed heads are found again !

CHAPTER VII

THE GIRL IN THE CAR

SUNDAY morning—not the Sunday of good serious people who wear silk hats, and eat midday roast beef, and hand round the bag in church, but the Sunday of laughing, idle sinners, who make extra merry on the Sabbath, because there is no painted curtain due to rise after the conclusion of an overture.

And on a white enamelled bedstead beneath a pink rose-sprigged quilt and on a white frilled pillow lay “Cecile Clare Kissler.” wide awake and thinking of the day which so far belonged all to the future.

Oh ! how wonderful are those days which so far belong all to the future ! How amazingly glorious contrasted with those poor old days which belong only to the past !

To think and wonder about what may be, what might be, what could be !—surely all such gay flower-starred dreams are double—if prepaid—consolations for the time when those days-to-come have drifted into days-that-are-gone !

The future is an under-capitalised Company of Possibilities ; but it is worth buying up all the shares we can get, for, taken at the very best, life and love can only be regarded as matters of speculation.

Sometimes we win—sometimes we lose. Usually the latter.

And though there was much in the definite past (that City—that deadening, deadly City—the click of machines—A.B.C. lunches—all standing between the gay, folly-filled present and the gentle restful days that had gone before) and much in the *indefinite* past (a bygone week of suppers and motor spins, and one man—one moustached stranger—all the time!), “Cecile Clare” lay in bed, setting her mind on future hours so near that they might almost have belonged to the present.

They were going to his home—she would see where he lived when he wasn’t planning great concerns built up with iron, or filling days and nights with the sort of gaiety that a man soon forgets—and she would see where he would live when he married somebody excessively “county” and grew to be the father of at least four well-bred little prigs.

“Cecile Clare” decided definitely that Gilbert Frayle belonged to that go-ahead type of manhood which has a tremendous contempt for its own going ahead, and which takes conscientious care that its children are brought up to realise the excellence of being prigs.

The subject of Gilbert Frayle always irritated her more or less, which seemed odd, seeing that hers was not a temperament which wore itself out by means of constant irritation. And though during the ten days which had elapsed—or was it eleven?—since the Dwarfs’ and Giants’ ball, she had seen Gilbert Frayle at least twenty times, Colonel Raythe had been still

more in evidence—and “Cecile Clare” never felt remotely irritated by the “dear Colonel.”

It must be the intermittent eyeglass, or the uncertainty whether he was smiling or not smiling, which annoyed her. She couldn’t really hit on anything else—definite. . . .

What was the time? Ten?—and they had promised to be ready by eleven!

Well, if they kept the car—as well as the owner of the car—waiting, it couldn’t be helped! Being young, and yellow-haired, and affluent, and on the stage, had taught “Cecile Clare” that keeping men and motors waiting never mattered a bit. They would always wait—so far!

In the old decent sweet-living days certainly she used to keep her father waiting while she put on thick boots to tramp round the stables and the styes and the pens; but afterwards—when there were managers and head clerks and “bosses” to be considered—it was rigid punctuality all the way.

Lawson Rolt—(ah! what a memory of shudders he was!—red nose, spots, ferrety eyes, and the horrible cuteness of one who lives on the publishable tragedies of others!)—yes, sometimes Lawson Rolt had been kept waiting, it’s true; and more than once Artemus had held the lift while Anna—

No, no, she *wasn’t* “Anna”—she was “Cecile Clare”—there had never been any Lawson Rolt, any Artemus, any lift, any City—never—never—never—never!

This was the danger of lying in bed awake, without anything to do or anything to read—thoughts and

recollections were so likely to stray in undesirable directions.

“Cecile Clare” would leave off thinking and recollecting—“Cecile Clare” would get up!

So she got up and bathed and dressed and made herself exquisite in a grey frock which clung softly and was sufficiently short to expose the extreme femininity of her high-heeled footgear.

The feminine note of chiffons and softness had become curiously pronounced in “Cecile Clare’s” costumes of late, while the white riding-school horse had been left to almost uninterrupted enjoyment of his oats and corn so far as “Miss Kissler” was concerned.

For the white riding-school horse meant the wearing of riding-kit—that particularly up-to-date order of riding-kit which had suddenly dropped from favour—therefore “Cecile Clare” now maintained the convention of skirts as far as possible.

She hadn’t worn breeches, coat, or top boots for ten days!

“Sir Gilbert Frayle and one other gentleman have come, madam, outside,” announced Margot, when “Miss Kissler’s” toilet was well on the road towards completion.

“Cecile Clare” adjusted a close, white-frilled bonnet, from which floated a motor veil of grey gauze. She looked like a little spurious Quaker or make-believe nurse!

“Ah! well, ask Miss Kray to go right down and entertain them till I come,” was her reply, spoken coolly and quietly while the motor veil was in process of being tied.

Margot nodded as if she knew all about it, and what was being done and why it was being done, and then left the room while "Cecile Clare" caused her leisurely methods to become even more leisurely. It was almost as if she were trying to show herself that she wasn't in the least eager or pleased, and that she hadn't the slightest desire in the world to hurry down and join the waiting people in the waiting car.

She would continue being very, very slow—very, very slow indeed—and even, though the weather was gay and spring-like, she would put on the long grey squirrel coat, and she would put on little pale grey gloves, and perhaps a huge fluffy grey boa. A boa wasn't really needed with a fur coat, but it lent a pretty completing touch of femininity to the whole toilette.

And now "Cecile Clare" was ready—and as she really was ready, there seemed no reason why she shouldn't go down to the waiting people in the waiting car.

So she went down, to find the chauffeur in front—and Pauline, with a pleasant-faced man (the sort of man who is always called upon to "make a fourth") at the back, and the two seats between quite empty—and Sir Gilbert standing on the pavement staring up disagreeably at the sky.

"Good morning," said "Cecile Clare."

Sir Gilbert made a point of still staring disagreeably, but his eyes looked very young with suddenly-lit fires, and his hand felt very large and strong and possessive as it held her own.

Of course he belonged to quite a normal and well-bred

type, and of course every man looks more or less splendid in the right sort of motor coat ; but in spite of these commonplace facts "Cecile Clare" couldn't help thinking that, with his Raglan shoulders, and big buttons, and fur linings, Gilbert Frayle looked unusually distinguished and effective.

"Captain Hophe—Miss Kissler," he said, introducing the pleasant-faced man as briefly as possible. Captain Hophe raised his cap and bowed in the genial yet aloof fashion of a person who knows he has been invited for the purpose of pairing off elsewhere—then "Cecile Clare" took her seat, and Gilbert tucked the rugs round her knees (glancing up into her eyes while he did it)—and then they started off to skim through the knives of clear-cutting north-east wind.

But though the blades of Boreas knocked at their faces and their eyes and their lips, he left no scars behind except lovely splashes of red-rose pink on the cheeks of "Cecile Clare."

And Gilbert watched her all the way. He hardly knew it himself—for making the running with a yellow-haired stage girl doesn't include watching for every little smile that touches her lips and waiting for every new sparkle that may enter her eyes ; but from the moment they started to the moment they halted his gaze was turned sideways towards his companion.

She was so amazingly exquisite in the wind—he couldn't help looking all the while !

"Say, I wish you had asked dear Colonel Raythe instead of that quite nice Captain Hophe !" she observed suddenly, when a glance behind had shown Pauline Kray talking with the persistent animation of a bored

woman who doesn't mean to show that she is bored.

"Why?" Gilbert put his query shortly and frowned. Presumably the wind or the lowered rim of his cloth hat had caused him to frown.

"Because he is such a dear, and makes everyone so happy."

"Useful person!"

"Oh! he is charming—he comes to see us *every* day!"

"Privileged individual!"

"Well, you've been every day this last week, haven't you?"

"I'm afraid I have trespassed."

"Oh! no, it hasn't been trespassing—we've liked to see you!"

"Thank you!"

"No, but why I wish dear Colonel Raythe had come along instead is that it'll be just beautiful when he and Pauline—Miss Kray, you know—get married. She's divorced one husband already, but I *do* want her to get another who's real nice!"

The frown cleared away, and Sir Gilbert nearly grinned at a by-passing nurse and infant who had required an unusual amount of "hoot-tooting" in order to make them avoid the unexpected excitement of a sudden death.

"You're quite right—he's a jolly decent chap. He must come down next week—quite a sportsman, I should imagine!" was the response, spoken with such unusual heartiness that "Cecile Clare" felt mildly surprised. She had never imagined that this dark-

moustached, restrained man who did wonders in the great hard world of iron and wheels and rails could be hearty! . . .

During the next hour neither said much to the other, for, despite the fact that "Cecile Clare Kissler" was on the stage, she belonged to that restful variety of womanhood which allows its mankind to be in love without keeping up a continued conversational flow of the question-and-answer order—for, after all, except in the case of glib *raconteurs* or specialists in the somewhat jerky art of repartee, conversation is (anyhow in the beginning of an acquaintance) nothing but a series of unnecessary queries and futile replies. Convention demands that we shall talk—which is a pity, because we are generally far more companionable when we are silent than when we speak!

But though Gilbert didn't ask "Cecile" if she liked the view, and though she didn't beg for information concerning some church or farm which failed to make the slightest claim upon her interest, that hour-and-a-half's spin through gay wind-swept country, over which the glamour of awakening spring had cast an impression of verdant gladness, drew them extraordinarily close together.

She was sitting beside him, quite, quite near—so near that every jerk or oscillation pressed their arms and shoulders close; and sometimes he would bend forward to wrap almost roughly and carelessly the rugs closer round her knees. Sitting in his car and going to the home that was really his, it seemed that she belonged to him—for the time being—that he was responsible for her—that she depended upon him; and feeling

all this it was only natural that he fully awoke to the consciousness of being very much in love—so much in love that if he didn't take care there seemed every fear of forgetting that she was a yellow-haired girl on the stage !

But he would take care !—oh yes, there was no fear that he wouldn't take very great care indeed !

CHAPTER VIII

A KISS THAT WASN'T ETIQUETTE

“ I THINK your home is beautiful ! ”

This was all “ Cecile ” said as they glided down beneath an avenue of barely-budding chestnuts to the white ivy-grown mansion which was raised so high that, viewed from the valley below, it looked like a mythical house built of snow—a fairy house which might melt away in a night.

Yes, only six simple words of sincere admiration, but as Sir Gilbert heard he felt that never before had he fully appreciated the place which was his own.

“ Yes, I’m fond of it when the wind isn’t in a too exuberant mood,” he answered lightly ; but there was pride at his heart—pride and positive pleasure that his home had been praised by a yellow-haired girl on the stage.

“ I guess this is the sort of house in which naughty kings did all sorts of naughty things ! ” exclaimed Pauline, as they passed into the hall, which was sombre and gloomy, as all country halls ought to be.

“ Not the inevitable second Charles or fourth George I do hope, dear boy ? One gets so tired of the second Charles and fourth George and their localised naughtinesses ! ” gurgled Captain Hophe facetiously.

Pauline joined in the gurgles, and made her pale face look extremely wicked behind a glistening motor veil of cinnamon-tinted gauze. But Gilbert turned away in order to help "Cecile" off with her coat. He didn't feel in the mood to discuss bygone monarchical gallantries just at the moment. His mother had never talked about them if she could help it—at least not when girls were present.

"If you'll go up, Wesbrook will see to your wants," he said, as the conventional housekeeper wearing the conventional black silk apron appeared at the head of the stairs.

"Thank you," answered "Cecile Clare," moving forward with a half-sedate, half-showy dignity which seemed strangely in keeping yet strangely out of keeping with the house.

And upstairs there were rooms so huge and lofty that great double beds and vast wardrobes looked less important than a bamboo stool in an ordinary Kensington drawing-room, while from every window were to be seen endless expanses of hill and valley and hedge-divided fields parted here and there by the silver-blue severance of a little winding river.

It made the girl who presumably hailed from a city of sky-scrapers and stores remember the view from other windows—home windows of long ago.

¶ But she must *not* remember—there was nothing to remember except—*America!*

When bonnets and veils had been removed, and warm water and powder and perfume had done the customary good work which they are called upon to do after a forty-miles' run through wind and dust, "Cecile"

and Pauline went downstairs and into the oak-panelled dining-room, where lunch was served without delay.

It was an excellent lunch, and when Pauline and the "fourth" man had consoled themselves for not being in love by eating a great deal of turbot and sweet-bread and English lamb, and by drinking a great deal of '98 Pommery, they all adjourned to the drawing-room.

"My! I guess these walls would just fix me up with a fine dinner-gown!" observed Pauline, indicating the panels of old gold silk worked with faded mauve *fleurs-de-lys* and shamrock.

Captain Hophe guffawed; then, as "Cecile Clare" moved in the direction of the grand piano in its case of delicate amber-wood, decorated with somewhat flamboyant gilt mouldings, he became struck by something great in the way of ideas—something which was likely to make things "go."

"Give us one of your naughty little ditties, Miss Kissler—of course you know any amount of naughty little ditties about naughty little girls," he said jovially and thickly.

"Cecile Clare" looked at him with a seriousness that was somewhat direct and disconcerting.

"Yes, I'll sing if you want me to—if Sir Gilbert wants me to," she answered.

Sir Gilbert bowed. This was the first time a stage girl had sung "a naughty little ditty" to his mother's piano.

"Cecile Clare" sat down—primly; "Cecile Clare" tinkled a few notes—idly; then, looking straight ahead she opened her rose-petal lips and sang—not a

coquettish morsel with a vocal wink in every line, and not a ballad dealing with the daring doings of "Tossie" nor "Janie" or "Maysie," who plundered earls and married a duke.

The song she sang was "Annie Laurie," and as Gilbert listened he felt grateful on behalf of his mother's piano.

"That's—er—er—by Jove! I believe that's just what I wanted to hear!" was all he said when the last sweetly-shrill and plaintive note had died away. But having grown to understand the man and his reticence, "Cecile Clare" was quite content not to receive any further appreciative comments. She knew that "Annie Laurie" had forged yet another link of sympathy between them.

For the next couple of hours they idled with that completeness and contentment which belongs only to Sunday, no matter in what pagan fashion Sunday may be spent; then, when Pauline and Captain Hophe had agreed upon adjournment to the billiard-room for "50 up" before starting on the return journey, Gilbert and "Cecile" were left to themselves.

"I guess if I begin getting into my coat" (so naturally and glibly came the "guesses" and "reckons" now!) "that I'll be ready by the time Pauline's begun to score," drawled "Cecile Clare," standing on tiptoe in front of a Cupid-framed mirror and pulling out the soft yellow puffs which covered her ears.

"Come and have a look at my study—you can see three ranges of hills from the window," said Gilbert, feeling half-grimly amused as he made the suggestion. As a boy he remembered having felt uncontrollably

contemptuous when his father would insist upon exhibiting those three ranges of hills, and now here he was falling into the same boring rut of hereditary enthusiasm just because he wanted a yellow-haired girl to enter the room which was more especially his room than any other in the house.

"I should like to see," answered "Cecile Clare" gravely, as he opened the door for her to pass out into the hall.

"It's on the next floor," said Gilbert; and making light through the gloom, she walked in silence by his side up the stairs, down a sharply-curving corridor, and into a small three-cornered room which suggested an overflow eccentricity of architecture more than a conventional apartment designed for conventional uses.

"How funny, but how nice! How nice and surprising!" exclaimed "Cecile Clare," with a touch of childishness that was charming and not in the least overdone.

Gilbert smiled quite a visible smile and took her across to the window.

"Hereditary feelings are coming out in me before their time—I am already beginning to insist upon showing people the three ranges of hills!" he said, with a grim burst of self-directed cynicism.

"Cecile Clare" looked slightly reproving—her moments of schoolmistress-like severity were charming.

"Well, I guess people would be very much interested to see them!" was her prim little answer, as she knelt on a deep low window-seat and stared out at the landscape which had been the special pride of Sir Gilbert Frayle's father.

And it *was* beautiful!—those three lines of hills which suggested the idea of one reality, with a reflected reflection behind, were poems of perspective.

“The first ones look like green fairies, and the second ones like grey ghosts, and the third ones like pearly clouds, don’t they?” murmured “Cecile Clare” dreamily.

Gilbert didn’t answer; his heart was beating with an extraordinarily heavy throb; he had never felt anything quite like it before.

Then very slowly “Cecile Clare” turned her head and smiled at him over her shoulder—a smile of courtesy and of kindness, and given in appreciation of his father’s hills.

But he forgot the hills, he forgot that he was host and that “Cecile Clare Kissler” was his guest, he forgot his own unborn dislike of spontaneity and impulse—he forgot everything except that he was in love with a yellow-haired girl, and that because he was in love he wanted to hold all that was soft and young and pink-and-gold of her in his arms.

“Cecile!” He just said her name, then came behind her as she knelt upon the window seat and held her as if she belonged to him.

She looked up wide-eyed and serious, and in looking up her red-petal mouth seemed set as a temptation not to be resisted.

Gilbert Frayle didn’t resist; he carried out the impulse to the end and kissed her stormily, desperately, on the lips.

There was no struggle, no response. The girl in his arms was quiescent, but when the kiss was over and

Gilbert lessened the pressure of his arms—probably only as a preliminary to tightening it again!—she moved a few steps away from the window seat, touching her gown as though she would smooth away all undesirable folds and creases.

"I didn't know if a gentleman invited ladies to his house that the ladies were likely to be taken up into a little room and treated as if they were common girls! I suppose it's one of the customs over here, but I don't care about it, and I guess that Miss Kray and I will now be going home by *ourselves*, if some one will order the car!" And having spoken calmly, seriously, and almost reflectively, the yellow-haired girl passed out of the room, leaving behind her a moustached man whose face was quite pale.

Sir Gilbert Frayle did not enjoy his first experience of feeling like a cad!

CHAPTER IX

A STAGE-DOOR PEACEMAKER

IT was *matinée* day—Wednesday—and Bertie Byne was waiting at the stage door of the Duke of Carmine's Theatre.

“ You are sure Miss Kissler hasn't come out yet ? ” he said for the second time, addressing the deputy stage door-keeper, who, because he *was* the deputy, put on doubly nonchalant and *blasé* airs in order to keep his dignity on a level with that of the legitimate holder of the post.

“ Couldn't be more sure,” he yawned, picking up a bundle of letters which had arrived by the last delivery, and languidly putting each envelope in its alphabetically correct rack. The rack marked “ K ” still remained empty, however.

Bertie Byne nodded and considered the advisability of a tip. But although Bertie knew that nothing less than a shilling will change the average stage door-keeper's grunt into a coherent reply, and that nothing less than half-a-crown will change his glare into a dawning smile, and that nothing less than half-a-sovereign will change his natural suspicions into confidential cordiality, Bertie refrained from steering his hand in the direction of his pocket.

Bertie wasn't here on his own account—in point of fact, Bertie never did frequent stage doors on his own account—therefore the extravagance of a tip was not worth while.

"Ahem!" Bertie gave a little cough and strutted a few steps up and down, in order to show that even if he didn't tip he was a person of importance—as undoubtedly he was, because a man who is commissioned to straighten another man's tangled gallantries is always a person of importance—anyhow to the other man, and possibly to the lady concerned in the affair!

Confound the girl! Why didn't she come? . . . Beastly draughty hole—poisonous, verminous hole, with nothing but unshaven beery loafers on the look-out for jobs at present filled by equally unshaven and beery loafers. . . . Ah! now they were coming along! —the hurrying chorus men who looked as if they belonged to a different world from that inhabited by idling chorus young women—a motherly "dresser" whose duties ended at the end of the third act—a "principal," exclusive as a duke and decorous as a parson—another "principal," haughty as a duchess and beautiful as a ten-guinea hat and two-guinea veil could make her—a brace of pitifully painted, fluffy, and self-important children—and now—now a rather small yellow-haired girl wearing lovely clothes and a pathetic expression!

"Oh!" she cried, on reaching the step and nearly falling against Bertie.

"Well, my dear girl, and why not? Why may I not be a moth among moths, a flutterer among flutterers, a worshipper among worshippers?"

"Don't be silly!" she replied, not in the least reprovingly, but in tones that sounded sad and bored.

"I won't—I will be wise and fraternal—I want to take you out to tea and talk to you!"

"Do you?"

"Yes—may I?"

"Well—yes—if you think so. I've got the car here—we can stop at the Carlton on the way home."

Bertie's beaming smile was a little stiff and forced. He hadn't quite intended a couple of florins and a shilling *douceur*, but—oh! well, Melik Oil Rivers must be bought up as well as Beukit Pyllamas, that's all. Bertie believed in being business-like all the way through.

With fussy fraternal devotion he helped her into the car, and with still fussier determination he helped her out again when they had crossed a circus and glided down a thoroughfare with a rural name.

"Cecile Clare" went in with the evolutions of a rotating door, passed sedately through a crowd of more or less smart people who all stared, and sat down at a table the size of a christening cake.

"Tea?" enquired Bertie.

"Oh! yes—please."

"Muffins and cakes and things?"

"Oh! yes—I guess so."

The waiter bowed as if he fully understood all the esoteric inwardness of unspoken appetites, and drifted away.

"Now, my dear girl, will you listen while I talk?" began Bertie, after he had returned the bows of a dowager countess, an accidental marchioness, a society

journalist with a pretty taste for implied blackmail, a suburban *divorcée*, and a conjurer's widow.

"Why, yes, I'll listen with very great pleasure," answered "Cecile" politely. "Cecile" was nearly always polite, which formed a pretty characteristic pose.

"Well, I want to talk to you about poor old Gilly Frayle!"

"Do you? Oh! is he called 'Gilly'?"

"Oh, well, I call him 'Gilly' when I'm sorry for the poor old chap."

"Do you? How funny!"

"Yes, well, I'm deuced sorry for him now, and he's deuced sorry for himself."

"Oh! well, he's got plenty of sympathy, hasn't he?"

"He may have sympathy, but—(yes, yes, that's all right so long as they've got plenty of butter on 'em!)—but sympathy's no good when he wants *forgiveness*!"

"Cecile Clare" poured out tea with the earnest air of trying to do her best; then, when both her own and Bertie's wants had been supplied, she made a critical observation concerning an adjacent hat.

Bertie swallowed a muffin, disregarded the adjacent hat, and set out to accomplish what he had been sent to accomplish.

"Look here, my dear girl, will you forgive poor old Gilly? It's dashed hard luck for him to be downed on like this for only doing what—er—well, what, after all, he had been led on to do?"

"Led on to do?" "Cecile Clare's" manner was

one of genuine astonishment. "However have I led Sir Gilbert on to kiss me in his own house?"

"Oh! well, I don't know about the house—etiquette can't always turn up just where it ought to turn up, you know—but—er—well, my dear girl, that diamond bracelet was as good a lead-on as any could very well be, wasn't it?"

"What diamond bracelet?"

"Well, hang it all, my dear girl, didn't poor old Gilly send a five-hundred-guinea bracelet round to the stage door, and didn't you keep it, and didn't you write a nice little note, nice enough to make any man do what he did last Sunday? It's only playing fair to remember these things, isn't it?"

"Cecile Clare" nodded slowly and stared into space.

Of course Bertie Byne didn't know—she was always forgetting that Bertie Byne didn't know—it always seemed as if, with Pauline Kray and Colonel Raythe, Bertie Byne ought to complete a trio of people who knew.

But he didn't know—to him she was actually the "Cecile Clare Kissler" who had been in the "*Caramel Sailor*" before going away to Normandy and returning to play in "*The Aeroplane Girl*."

"I suppose," she said, after a pause, during which a hundred thoughts and fears scurried and hurried, "that by keeping that bracelet and writing that note I gave Sir Gilbert the idea that—that—"

"Of course, my dear girl, that's just the idea you *did* give. I should have thought you'd have been on the stage long enough to know that!" And Bertie

couldn't help a good-natured giggle. He had always known that "Cecile Clare" was a "run straighter," but he did think that formerly she had combined a certain amount of cuteness with her straight-running.

"Of course—yes—I do see that now. It was, in a way, hard lines on Sir Gilbert. I see now it was kind of hard lines!" answered "Cecile Clare" at last.

"Then you'll kiss and be friends—at least—sorry!—I mean be friends without the kissing?"

"I should say that I might later on—but of course I don't quite know. Anyhow, you can tell Sir Gilbert that I don't blame him now like I thought I did before you reminded me of the bracelet and—and the note!"

"My dear girl, I can't say anything about that! You don't think he's ever spoken about it, do you? Hardly!—that's not one of his little ways. No, I shouldn't have known if Pauline hadn't told me at the time—you remember?"

"Yes, I remember—of course. And can you tell me—I forget so soon—everything seems to go out of my head)—if it was anything very special in the way of a note?"

"Bless my soul, no! Just—er—thanks prettily put—that's all! But when a girl keeps a chap's diamonds, well—"

"Yes, yes—I see now—of course I see. I am sorry if it's hard lines on Sir Gilbert—I really am sorry! And now I must be getting right along—I always like to rest between the shows, you know. . . . No, no, you finish your tea—it's no good your coming, because I shall be going right home. . . . Good-bye—thank you!" And, without knowing if she was

thanking him for uneaten *éclair* or for having championed the cause of a man who had done what presumably he had every conventional right to do, "Cecile Clare Kissler" passed out of the Carlton into the car.

Quite bolt upright she sat staring at the great bunch of violets fixed in the flower-holder between the windows.

Dear Colonel Raythe had given her the violets—dear Colonel Raythe, who was different from men who—who *misunderstood*!

"Cecile Clare" opened her blue eyes very, very wide, not so much because she wanted to enhance the clearness of her vision as because the smarting danger signal of tears pricked very hard.

It was curious, this sudden irresistible inclination to cry—very, very curious, seeing that "Cecile Clare Kissler," even in childhood's days, when she was "little Anna Merrick"—had never been one of those children or girls who break into tears as the only solution of any and every difficulty.

She didn't like crying—it was futile and undignified—it was unbecoming—she didn't want to cry—she wouldn't cry!

The car stopped, and the girl from the Duke of Carmine's entered her own flat which was really somebody else's flat, but which, with the proprietorial adaptability of human nature, she had already learnt to regard from the pleasant standpoint of possessive tense.

"You met at *my* house!" (with the landlord responsible for the ground rent)—"come up into *my* room"—(when there are at least two or three hundred others

belonging to the same hotel proprietor)—“ I shall miss *my train* ” (with a railway company in full possession)—“ why don’t you try *my corsetière* ? ” (whose *clientèle* is large and varied !) *My!—my—my—my!!!* We all say it—we all think it—when probably not in the whole world is there a single possession (not excluding the love of one human heart) which is actually our own and altogether unshared !

The possessive tense of conversational custom ! After all, it sounds pleasant and gratifying—let it rest !—It will be all the same when Mr. Lloyd-George and Eternity get their way !

“ Pauline ! ”

“ Cecile Clare ” called quite gently, but somehow the sound carried.

“ Here I am, honey,” sang out Miss Kray from almost the only room which didn’t open out of another room. It was an apartment with green decorations, and the one in which Miss Kray slept, although the scheme of upholstery did not make the best of her complexion.

“ Cecile Clare ” entered, and without making the slightest parade of determination showed herself to be very determined indeed.

“ Are—you—are you writing to-day ? ” she enquired, glancing at an open blotter and a fountain pen.

“ Just marshalling my ideas in order for that purpose, dearie,” answered Pauline, speaking as if she liked the second “ Cecile Clare ” very much indeed. She always spoke as if she liked the second “ Cecile Clare ” very much indeed.

“ Then please just say that unless within a week I

receive a diamond bracelet which was sent by Sir Gilbert Frayle to the stage door, and also receive written permission to return that bracelet to Sir Gilbert, I shall give it all up. Nothing will make me go on more than a week without returning that bracelet to Sir Gilbert. Please, Pauline, make that just quite clear, won't you ? "

" I will, dearie, of course, if —— "

" Thank you, Pauline, I hope that'll make it all right. I don't want to give up just as we are getting along so nicely ; " and without waiting to hear any remonstrance—which, however, Miss Kray would have been far too diplomatic and tactful to make—" Cecile Clare " quitted the apartment upholstered in unbecoming green.

It was of no use trying to avert it any longer—she *must cry* ! Her eyes were smarting and aching in such an extraordinary fashion that there could be no possible relief without the shedding of tears. " Cecile Clare " had always heard that " nervy " women were bound to cry at times—it might be possible that stage life was causing her to develop into a " nervy " woman.

Should she cry in her own bedroom ? No, Margot was in there mending lace.

The drawing room ? Yes, the big couch and big cushions would serve as admirable background for a tearful outburst when once the outburst began to—why ! it had begun already ! Huge tears were standing on the ends of " Cecile Clare's " dark eyelashes, and her delicate rounded bosom was beginning to heave as feminine bosoms do heave when the heart beneath refuses to lie quiescent and undisturbed.

So " Cecile Clare " cut through the dining-room and

into the drawing-room—moving aimlessly as tear-blindness causes us to move, and paying no heed to impending footstools or obtrusive tables.

Here was the big lounge, here were the fat cushions—now she could cry undisturbed and about nothing at all for exactly ten minutes.

Deliberately she put her yellow head down in the exact centre of a cut-out cretonne rose appliquéd on to white muslin, and deliberately she prepared to drench and discolour the unoffending blossom.

But before the cushion could be damaged, and before two smarting blue eyes could obtain any material relief, a white, plump, delightful hand was laid on "Cecile Clare's" shoulder, and somebody sat down by her side on the huge lounge.

"Oh! I—I—didn't know you—or any one—w-was here!" cried "Cecile Clare," as she looked up through a salt and shining cascade to see the healthy, handsome face and youthful although silvered moustache of Colonel Raythe.

"Of course I'm here, my dear little girl—of course I'm here, just in time to tell you to laugh instead of cry!" he answered cheerfully, but yet not with that inartistic order of cheerfulness which causes low spirits to droop lower than ever.

"But I—I *w-w-want* to cr-cry—it'll do me good!" answered "Cecile Clare" seriously.

"Will it, my dear? I doubt it. But if you think so, cry on my shoulder instead of on a silly old cushion that doesn't know what sympathy means. Poor little girl—*poor* little girl!"

And because his moustache was silver—entirely

forgetting that his blue eyes were fresh and boyish, and that his square shoulders were strong with manhood's full strength, and that his capacity for emotion was at its zenith—"Cecile Clare Kissler" permitted herself the luxury of weeping on what she regarded as a safe, fatherly, or elder-brotherly shoulder, instead of on a cut-out cretonne rose edged with stiff braid.

And certainly it was far more comfortable and far more sympathetic; and though "Cecile Clare" hadn't the remotest idea that a kiss had been dropped on the yellow softness of her hair, and that two fresh blue eyes were blazing passionate fires, she felt more convinced than ever that this very nice smart man who knew her secret was a real and sincere friend who could be trusted.

"Thank you—I guess I'm better now!" she said! when the human sympathy of a shoulder had done good work.

For a second it seemed as if the comforting clasp of Colonel Raythe's arm was not going to relax; but an instant later he was straightening the cushions while "Cecile Clare" wiped the remaining tears off the ends of her lashes.

"Well, my dear, you *do* cry prettily—just like a little flower washed by a little shower, without a single trace left behind!" he said, smiling a jolly genial smile—the sort of smile which serves as a guarantee concerning the delightful desirability of the world, and everybody in it.

Then "Cecile Clare" smiled as well—it was inevitable—she couldn't help it—and walked over to the glass for the purpose of testifying to the truth of the

Colonel's reassuring statement. Yes, it was all right ! —not a hint of redness even near the nose—not a puff—not a blotch—not a smear !

" And why the little weep ? " queried the Colonel in a light tone, which suggested that they were mutually enjoying a pretty jest.

" Cecile Clare " stared at him very seriously, and with a sincerely puzzled expression that caused her to look exactly like her most effective portrait that had been published recently in the *Loiterer*.

" Well, d'you know I jest can't tell ! That's the truth of it—I jest can't tell because I jest don't know ! " she answered, with the strongest and most conventional accent that has ever reached this side of the Atlantic.

Colonel Raythe roared, and ten minutes after " Cecile Clare " was dressing for the theatre, while telling herself that she really felt more happy and more cheerful than she had ever felt before.

It is a very good plan to tell oneself those sort of things, even if they are not true ; there's every chance that we may believe our own mistaken assurances—and solid human contentment generally consists in believing what isn't true !

CHAPTER X

A "TOP-LIGHT SERIES" INTERVIEW

MR. LAWSON ROLT's duties on the *Morning Cry* were over for the day.

He had secured a fine "story" about a bigamist with a craze for vaccination, written up a "grand stunt" concerning a forger and would-be suicide's baby (the baby had, according to Mr. Rolt's pathetic and popular version, insisted upon sending daddy a copy-book, pencil, and penknife to amuse him in prison); nosed out half a column of exclusive facts dealing with a fashionable murder, and denied a royal scandal that had never been spread abroad.

All this was a fair morning's work, and now, when he had lunched off sandwiches and lager, eaten and drunk on one side of a marble-topped counter, he proposed adding to his income by doing a little outside work for the *Sceptre*.

The *Sceptre* was badly in want of interviews for their "SHINING TOP-LIGHT" series; and if Mr. Rolt could secure two columns of new and original "copy" that would mean an extra couple of sovereigns for his nickel case and an extra couple of shillings for his trouser pocket.

And just at the moment Lawson was particularly in want of extra sovereigns and shillings, for, pending his promotion from the London to the Manchester offices of the *Morning Cry*, there were a good many expenses to be met and not a great deal of money to meet them with. So many firms which Mr. Rolt had honoured by the purchase of boots and suits and collars and ties seemed to have discovered the fact of the distinguished journalist's approaching departure, with the result that communications contained in oblong envelopes poured in by nearly every other post.

It was very necessary that Mr. Lawson Rolt should rake in a great many odd guineas, and if he could get something new in the way of a "Top-light" interview that would be two among the many.

He leaned against the marble counter, put his teeth into the centre of a sandwich, and was just looking down the ruddily purple line of his nose to see how much sandwich remained after the bite had been bitten when a limp though cordial hand slapped him on the shoulder.

He turned round and saw a tall, thin youth, whose length of hair was more due to an artistic temperament than to intentional neglect of tonsorial rites.

This was Mr. Evan Scritt, who wrote poetry and professed to receive payment for his efforts. But no one quite knew where the poetry appeared or whence came the payment. Unkind and almost actionable people said that Mr. Evan Scritt had private means.

"Hullo!" said Lawson, with telephonic brevity.
"What doing?"

"Writing!" replied Evan with telegraphic accuracy.

(Whoever has yet sent a telegram without the word “*writing*” to use up the odd halfpenny ?) “ And you ? ”

“ Getting some grand exclusive ‘ scoops,’ old boy—so grand that the Chief seems to shove everything on to me and spends half the day patting me on the back ! Yes, getting on A 1—but just at the moment I want to fill a couple of hours which might as well be turned into good gold and good silver by doing a ‘ Top-light Interview ’ for the *Sceptre*.”

“ Yes—well—why don’t you ? ” asked Mr. Scritt plaintively. He always felt plaintive when another man would do all the talking.

“ Can’t think who to get—all the nobs have been done.”

Evan Scritt mused. He was always very good-natured in thinking out plans by means of which other men could earn money—one of the traits which had given rise to actionable report concerning Mr. Scritt’s private means. For, quite wisely, no working journalist will ever help another journalist to earn guineas which could be possibly kept in the family.

“ Why not go for this new girl at the Duke of Carmine’s ? —er—what’s her name ? She’s managed a big illustrated paper boom just lately—you must have seen her portraits about ? ”

“ Don’t remember ! ” replied Lawson, before making another crescent-shaped incision into another sandwich.

“ Oh ! but you’ll know the name—it’s the sort of name that sticks, and—ah ! yes, I remember—Kissler ! —that’s it—Cecile Clare Kissler in ‘ *The Aeroplane Girl* ’ ! ”

Lawson gurgled and swallowed an enormous gulp of lager for the purpose of getting the sandwich out of the way.

"By Jove!—yes—of course, the name's been about a lot, and I know a couple of chaps in the chorus who were only talking about her the other night. The Pyramid Bridge chap—er—Frayle——"

"Sir Gilbert Frayle?"

"That's the Johnny—yes, they said he was making the running, or wanting to make the running, or something. . . . By Jove! Scritt, old chap, that's an idea worth getting hold of. Where does the lady live?"

"I don't know—they'll tell you at the theatre." And with a gently weary albeit playfully pronounced "*au revoir*" Mr. Evan Scritt glided away from the marble-topped counter to regions where cold meat and potato salad could be eaten sitting down and with a knife and fork.

Of course Mr. Evan Scritt had private means!

But Lawson Rolt—who was provided with the true journalistic appetite, which is assertive when there's time to eat a meal or any obliging acquaintance ready to pay for it, and quiescent when a "scoop" or a "stunt" demands attention—had finished with food *pro tem.*

What he wanted to do was to reach a telephone just as quickly as a telephone could be reached. So he paid for the sandwiches and the lager and strode out and round the corner, getting the necessary two pennies ready as he went.

Here was the call-box—empty—not out of order!

Lawson went into it, and taking down the receiver put his thin lips and purple nose to the transmitter, which was still damp with the perfumed breath of a widow who had been reproaching a recalcitrant lover.

"0808 Gerrard."

The Exchange didn't do anything tiresome, and in a moment the stage door-keeper's grunt became audible.

"Are you the Duke of Carmine's?"

"Um!"

"Can you give me Miss Kissler's private address?"

"'Oo?"

"Miss Cecile Clare Kissler. She asked me round to tea this afternoon, and I've forgotten the number. Would you please tell me?"

"Tommy, what's Miss Kissler's number? No, look in the book, you fat'ead! Are yer there?"

"Yes."

"It's ooo, Southwest Mansions."

"Oh! yes, of course—thanks very much. Good-bye!"

"Umph!"

That was satisfactory—very satisfactory—and now should it be a taxi or a 'bus?

Lawson stepped out of the box, and was just deliberating between waste of time and twopence and rapid transmit and a shilling when a smoothly-rolling open green taxi glided by.

"Hey!" cried Lawson, quickly deciding that the additional tenpence was worth while—and an instant later he was sitting back with his unconsciously weary head dropping on his chest and his unconsciously

tired feet sprawling as feet do sprawl when the ankles ache with fatigue.

A taxi ! Of course he was always chartering taxis—at the *Morning Cry's* expense—and of course they were often large taxis and green taxis. But there was something about this particular taxi which caused Lawson Rolt to recall another taxi, which, at the end of a hot summer afternoon, had glided through City streets westwards to suburban roads.

Side by side they had sat—he and Anna Merrick—and he had held her hand in not quite the same way as he had held any other girl's hand before. For even with the preliminary rites of hand-holding there are differences to be observed—and remembered ! Storm hours of passion, years of companionship, frenzied kisses, may all be obscured by the chiffon veils of Time, while one hand-clasp—the clasp of another hand—stands out as a recollection to be carried into the star-spangled skies of Eternity.

Yes, Lawson Rolt had held Anna Merrick's hand while they taxied from the Monument Station to Parsons Green, and she had practically promised to marry him—and then he had kissed her, and he had looked forward to the time when she should mend his socks and look after his flat ; and then—then she had read a letter with a French postmark and jilted him right away !!

Ah ! she was a little beast. Whenever Lawson thought about her at all he thought about her as a "little beast," and though there was too little romance in his temperament and too much driving hustle in his life for him to spend many dreaming hours in remem-

bering a girl who had half-permitted him to taste the sweetness of her lips before giving him a "slap in the face" (he remembered having used the phrase himself—"a slap in the face"!), the recollection of that keen sudden disappointment would never fade away entirely.

In his mind there always lingered a very definite idea that he wanted to pay back that affront to which his pride and affections had been subjected. If he ever met Anna—if he ever found time really to look for Anna—he would make himself quite conspicuously disagreeable and, by so doing, endeavour to get a little of his own back.

She was so confoundedly pretty, too, in her own way, which, unfortunately, was just the way in which Lawson Rolt liked women to be pretty. He couldn't stand dark girls who flashed, or clever girls who talked theories, or frivolous girls who giggled—he just liked the grave serenity of a girl whose fair restfulness would have made an ideal background for his rushing, tearing, lying, pushing, perspiring life.

And she would have looked after the flat so well, and mended his socks, and—

At this point, however, Lawson emitted a contemptuous "Phewff!" lifted his chin from his tie, drew together his sprawling tired feet, lit a Gold Flake cigarette, and turned his thoughts in the direction of the forthcoming interview—viz., of the interview which he hoped would be forthcoming.

Cecile Clare Kissler! Of course he remembered the name quite well, but it was unfortunate he didn't know something about the lady in question. Never mind, he could always pretend to know, drawing informa-

tion during the process of pretence—as he had done only yesterday when interviewing the stepdaughter of a coal-heaver who was alleged to have battered his landlady's skull in order to extract seventeen shillings and threepence from beneath the mattress.

Lawson was full of resource as well as lager beer.

And here was the street and here was the florist's, above which rose tiers of alarmingly expensive flats; and now (having paid the driver and hurried on heedless of protestation) Lawson stood in front of a narrow front door.

He rang the bell, and when the door was opened stepped into the hall without being asked.

"Good afternoon," he said, addressing a buxom Frenchwoman whom he realised immediately was ready to become (remunerated) an ally. "Is Miss Kissler at home?"

The Frenchwoman hesitated. She couldn't quite make up her mind whether to lie or not.

"Yes, I can see she is!" was Lawson's genial interruption to the hesitation. "And please will you let me see her?" he added, with a touch of diplomacy which suggested that the entire engineering of the situation (together with a florin from his own pocket) lay in his companion's hands.

"What is ze name, sir?" she asked, deftly transferring the coin from her palm to the bosom of her gown.

"Well, Miss Kissler wouldn't know the name. I have come from the *Sceptre*—you know the smart weekly paper which—"

Gaily the Frenchwoman interrupted, for she now

realised that it was possible to be obliging without any effort or difficulty.

"It will be good, sir—so ! Mees Kissler like very much the *journals*. If you sit a moment I tell Mees Kissler and she will receive you, *I know !*"

Lawson sat a moment while the Frenchwoman disappeared through one door to reappear two minutes afterwards at another door.

"Come !—pleze !" she said, with the self-satisfied smile of a person who in spite of great difficulties has achieved great results.

Lawson rose, gave himself and his clothes a straightening comprehensive pull, and followed his guide across carpets that were silent and thick and through a room which led into another room.

And now the door of the other room was reached—it was thrown open—there was a vista of rose-strewn chintz—of flowers—of silver—of pink—of pearly green—

"*Monsieur* from the journal, *Madame !*" announced the Frenchwoman.

Lawson entered—someone bowed without rising—someone whose hair was cowslip-tinted and who wore a white frock, simple and expensive as a society baby's christening robe.

She herself presented the air of a half-grown-up baby.

"I am very pleased you have come along," she began.

Then there was a second of silence.

"My God !—*Anna !*" cried Lawson Rolt.

And the half-grown-up baby made no reply.

CHAPTER XI

THE DRAMA V. THE PRESS

BUT the moment of silence was a very short one, for somewhere in her nature "Cecile Clare" possessed a strain of relentless unyielding pluck, such as is often absent with emancipated dashing women and girls who make a pose of being ready for every emergency.

She had felt the colour receding from her face, but by a giant effort of will she overcame her pallor as well as the suffocating throb of her heart.

There was a battle to be fought—she must fight.

"I guess you're on the wrong tack! What do you mean?—or is it the way of English interviewers to turn around and say '*My God—Anna!*' directly they enter a room?" said "Cecile Clare Kissler" calmly, a little amusedly, and quite fearlessly.

Lawson Rolt gasped. He had been through many sordid and astounding experiences without betraying unjournalistic emotion, but this display of gigantic amazing effrontery took the wind out of even his well-rigged emotional sails.

But gradually he recovered himself. It *was* Anna—without a shadow of doubt it was Anna—and if it came to playing a game of bluff he would back himself to win.

" This is a rather disconcerting surprise for you, I'm afraid," he said, sitting down on a dainty chintz-covered chair and settling his feet with an air of ugly determination.

" Cecile Clare " looked enquiringly at those feet.

" It's not disconcerting to be paid a visit by a gentleman from a newspaper, but I guess it's surprising to be called '*Anna*' ! Do say why you called out 'Anna' ? " And with this last query she stared with childish wonderment right into the very centre of his eyes. For it is only in the very centre of a man's eyes that his will can be found and intimidated. The coward is like the forest beast—he must be stared into submission.

" I called you 'Anna' because you are 'Anna'—'Anna Merrick,' who used to type for thirty bob a week in the Publicity Department of the New York Automatic Change Delivery Company's offices in Cornhill ! " he answered stubbornly.

Anna continued to stare; then she answered, seriously and kindly,

" You're not very well to-day—just you let my maid bring you some brandy, and then you be getting right home," she said.

Lawson laughed insolently—then swore half inaudibly—then once again called brutal determination to his aid.

" Look here, Anna " (he spoke the name insolently—as if he had every right to speak it), " don't be afraid—I'm going to blackmail or do anything low-down like that. I certainly owe you a pretty good-sized grudge, but I don't want to pay off any scores if you'll play

a decent sort of game ; and it isn't a decent sort of game to hang on to useless lies with the man you promised to marry half-an-hour before you gave him the chuck on the strength of a letter from France ! Come along—you play the game and *I'll* play the game. It's the only way of settling these things comfortably."

Just for one brief second "Cecile Clare" hesitated—the fatal hesitation of a person who fails—then she got up swiftly and quietly, and went to the door.

"Pauline !—Pauline !—come !—come right along ! There's a gentleman here who's not very well !—come !" she called, while Lawson Rolt made the disastrous mistake of doing nothing at all.

It is always a sign of surrender to do nothing at all.

Immediately Pauline responded to the summons and entered the room.

"Cecile Clare" looked at her, she looked at "Cecile Clare"—both of them those super-expressionless glances which sometimes serve as complete a purpose as the most verbose explanation ; then the actress proceeded to detail the extraordinary case of the journalist in search of copy.

"Say, Pauline, this gentleman sent in word that he wanted to interview me for the *Sceptre*, then directly he got right in he called me '*Anna Merrick*,' and talked about some typewriting office in the City ! Perhaps you can get some sort of an explanation !" she said, making a great parade of kindly tolerance allied to increased astonishment.

Pauline took up the cue, and Lawson Rolt began to feel as if he were a dangerous lunatic whom patient,

womanly nurses were trying to soothe and comfort. His fury was of the bursting variety, yet he dare not burst ; no possible good could come of bursting, particularly when, after all, it was a two-guinea interview to be secured !

“ Try to tell us what you mean—I guess we shall be able to help you. What is your name ? ” said Pauline, so gently and considerately that Lawson felt convinced she would soon begin trying cold water compresses on his brow.

“ My name is Lawson Rolt—Miss Anna Merrick knows it is Lawson Rolt ; she knows that less than four months ago she promised to be my wife, and then broke the promise half-an-hour later when she had opened a letter from France—sh-she d-does—of cOURSE she does—”

He was growing almost incoherent now, and as Pauline looked across at Anna she made a very significant movement of her eyebrows before throwing one swift glance in the direction of the bell. The movement and the glance so obviously meant “ Quite mad—ring for the porter ! ”

“ Look here, Mr. Lawson Rolt,” she said, while “ Cecile Clare ” still went on with her blue-eyed stare of innocent bewilderment, “ it’s one of two things—either a case of madness or mistaken identity. If it’s the former, I’m afraid we’ll have to ask the big porter to come up and do his little best while we telephone the *Sceptre* for information as to what asylum you’ve come from. But if it’s the latter, there’s still time for you to get rid of all those queer ideas of ‘ Annas ’ and City offices right away, and to

get on with the interview. As the *Sceptre* is printed on nice paper and gets displayed well about on the bookstalls, I don't doubt that my friend Miss Kissler may be induced to grant you the interview—which we hope may bring you a pleasant and useful little cheque—but as she's got several engagements for this afternoon, you must set to work right away if you want to do it at all. . . . Now, how shall we settle it, do you think ? "

Lawson was cornered. He had to admit that someone had beaten him in his own lines of cunning and bluff.

Anna Merrick was sitting less than five yards away, and libel writs would be still more adjacent if he insisted that Anna Merrick was sitting less than five yards away !

He wanted two guineas—two guineas could be earned by temporarily accepting Anna Merrick as "Cecile Clare Kissler"—there was no way of so doing except *by* so doing !

And revenge ! Well, now that he had found her, now that he knew the secret which was, evidently, her one supreme desire to keep a secret, opportunities for a nice satisfactory little revenge of the stealthy knock-in-the-dark variety would be bound to come along by-and-bye.

Revenge, like port, often improves by being kept bottled up, and a cheque for two guineas is one of those pretty little paper decorations which help so satisfactorily in the scheme of beautifying existence !

" You'd like to do the interview now, I think, wouldn't you, Mr. Rolt ? " sounded Pauline Kray's

voice—a voice with a twang, it's true, but oh! so subtle, so smooth, and so insinuating!

From beneath his thick eyebrows and down his purplish nose Lawson shot one last venomous glance at "Cecile Clare's" half-surprised, half-vacant little pink-and-white face—then he drew out a greasy note book and an aluminium pencil, which on more than one occasion had been mistaken for gold.

"Yes, I may as well do it now," he answered sullenly; whereat "Cecile Clare" re-settled herself with an obvious desire to be business-like and obliging.

Lawson Rolt coughed, smiled sardonically, and put his first question.

"By your accent one may assume that you are an American, Miss Kissler?" he said, longing for the lie which must leave her lips. (Even this would be a miniature revenge, for Anna Merrick had always dispensed with lies!)

"I guess you may assume that right away!" was her response, made lightly, easily, and naturally.

Lawson bit his lips and almost grinned. She *was* "a cunning little devil!"

"From what part of America do you hail—where were you born?" (He knew she was born in Middle-shire, because once she had told him about the ivy-grown home set in a valley.)

"Well, now you jest put down that 'Cecile Clare Kissler' was born in Iowa, that her father was an Episcopalian clergyman, that only a few months ago she was singing in his church with the light from the stained-glass windows streaming down upon her yellow hair (you might bring in the yellow hair as often as

you can !) ; that she loves her work, that if she don't get right near to the top of the tree she'll have to go back to Iowa and sing again in her poppa's church instead of singing at the Duke of Carmine's Theatre ; and that she thinks the stage is the very best life in the world ! *That's* what you can put down about 'Cecile Clare Kissler,' Mr. Rolt ! "

So she had scored again ! All necessary information given without one use of the first person singular !

"Have you always felt drawn towards a career behind the footlights ?" was Lawson's next query.

"Why, yes, I've always just loved the idea of the stage !"

"You made your first appearance in '*The Caramel Sailor*,' did you not ?"

"Yes, that was the beginning of 'Cecile Clare' on the boards !"

"And may I ask why you didn't go on the stage before ?"

"Because my father would have disapproved, and because—oh ! surely you know all about the godmother ? Oh ! such lots of people know about 'Cecile Clare's' fairy godmother who waved a fairy wand and gave her lots of money and sent her across the Atlantic to win or lose in the race for success ? And you can tell all the readers of your beautiful paper, Mr. Dolt——"

("Mr Rolt, honey !" corrected Pauline in parenthesis.)

"—Sorry, Mr. Rolt !—yes, you can tell all your readers that 'Cecile Clare' means to do a little win in that race ! It mayn't be a very big win—it won't

be anything like a walk-over—but she'll push along some way till she gets right there! . . . Now I don't believe there is anything else to say except to ask you to take a glass of wine and to thank you for so kindly calling around. Pauline, you'll give Mr. Dolt—pardon, Mr. Rolt—a glass of wine, won't you? Good-day, Mr. Rolt—I hope the interview will come out soon!"

A slow courteous little smile—another brave look into the centre of his eyes—and then Lawson Rolt was alone with Miss Kray, his own shorthand notes, and his own chagrin.

"You'd rather have wine, or would a whisky and soda suit you best?" Miss Kray was just enquiring when the door opened and Margot entered the room.

"Sir Gilbert Frayle, madam—he has made appointment with Miss Kissler for this afternoon," she said; but before there could be any response, a man who was tall and dark and moustached appeared on the threshold.

Miss Kray went towards him at once, and Lawson Rolt remained busy with his shorthand notes.

"Ah, Sir Gilbert, how do you do?" she cried, with an effusiveness which in an Englishwoman would have been third-rate, but which in her case gave an impression of cordiality as it ought to be.

Sir Gilbert offered no details on the subject of his well or ill doing, and held anything like a smile of geniality rigidly in check. Presumably it was one of his emotional moments, which evidenced itself by means of a more than usual Sphinx-like exterior.

"Miss Kissler was good enough to say that she would

see me this afternoon," he said glancing at Lawson Rolt as if Lawson Rolt were a new and unimportant piece of furniture.

"Of course—and so she will! You won't mind waiting a few minutes, will you? '*Cecile Clare*' has just gone to recover from the pleasant effect of being a celebrity! This gentleman has been interviewing her for the *Sceptre*!"

"Ah! yes," replied Gilbert, with a casual curtness which seemed to suggest that the gentleman might be a footman and the *Sceptre* a consignment of waste paper. "I'll wait, then," he added, "and please ask Miss Kissler not to hurry. I'm quite all right for time."

Miss Kray made suitable response, then by means of a quick smile and cordial gesture summoned Lawson to the adjoining room, where decanters and glasses standing on a Sheraton sideboard presented a pleasant sight for any thirsty interviewer who had not drunk so much lager beer as he would have wished to drink.

But though Lawson Rolt polished off a stiff whisky and soda with all the swiftness and assurance which are imparted by experience and enthusiasm, he was not able to pay full and thoughtful attention to his drink.

He swallowed, it's true—swallowed thirstily—but all the while his trachea and larynx were doing good work his keen shrewd mind was busy with thoughts of Sir Gilbert Frayle.

So far Anna had scored again—scored all the way, in fact—but there might come a day when through

the medium of an eligible baronet Lawson could get his own back.

Of course that day might be far delayed, and it wouldn't matter if it were, because during the next month or so Lawson would be too busy with the rush of taking up his new post in Manchester for the paying-off of petty scores.

"Yes," decided Lawson with his final gulp, "later on Sir Gilbert Frayle, of Pyramid Bridge fame, might serve quite a useful and satisfying purpose."

Meanwhile Anna Merrick was a "cunning brazen little devil!"

That's what Anna Merrick was in the opinion of Mr. Lawson Rolt!

CHAPTER XII

EXIT—DIAMONDS !

“ CECILE CLARE ” was in the pink and white bower which unimaginative mundane people would have called a bedroom.

She had been through a frightening experience, and it had left her feeling strangely fagged and bereft of pluck—almost as she had felt in those bygone City days when the manager used to send for her to—

No, no, there were ~~not~~ any bygone City days ! Just because a shrewd-eyed newspaper man had been insistent and unnerving, there was no need to drift into trains of thought that were both unsettling and unsafe !

Besides, she didn’t want to think about the newspaper man any more, when at any moment another man who wasn’t anything to do with newspapers was due to arrive.

“ Cecile Clare ” sat down on the bed, and although her face was not touched by any of the hideous ruts and contortions which ruin the mouths and brows and cheeks of women who worry, there was an expression of half-dazed fear to be found in the blue of her wide-open eyes.

There was the sudden feeling (which comes to every woman whose sphere of activity is not confined to living in a home and wearing clothes paid for by somebody else) that she couldn't go on any longer.

Nothing seemed quite worth while, and when one man had reason to think that she was what she wasn't, and another man had found out a secret which it was her business to keep—well—well, somehow it seemed as if the end of all possibilities had been reached !

Stage life and small successes were only stimulating as champagne—which requires to be followed by more champagne if gay and optimistic results are to be maintained—is stimulating.

Spending money is a pleasant pastime ; seeing the very bad side of the world (such as must necessarily be seen by a girl on the stage) was a diverting hobby ; being somebody instead of nobody was exhilarating ; but when it came to a want of something that had no part with vanity, extravagance, and general aspiration "Cecile Clare" found her full life empty and her merry life dull.

Quite still she sat staring at a tiny white moulded Cupid set in the centre of the dressing-table mirror, till Pauline knocked at the door and entered.

"Say, honey, Sir Gilbert's waiting to see you," she said, dropping her voice into the low, muffled key which sympathetic women employ when speaking of either their own or other people's love affairs.

"Ah ! yes—I arranged for him to come," answered "Cecile Clare" monotonously.

"Then get right in, my dear, and see the poor soul. He looks sour enough to turn all the milk in London."

" Cecile Clare " nodded.

" Oh, Pauline ! " She rose suddenly and cast aside the dazed vacancy of her manner, " what do you think of what happened this afternoon ? "

" I don't think anything about it, my dear, and I ain't going to think anything about it. As I told you, it's dangerous discussing these things even between ourselves ! "

" Yes, it may be, but sometimes I must say something—and I must say something now about Lawson Rolt ! It's quite true that just for one hour—when I couldn't see any way out of anything—I almost promised to marry him ; and he hates me now—he hates me ! Can he do anything dangerous ? Can he spoil my being able to carry through what I've undertaken to carry through ? "

" Of course he can't, my dear—the truth is the one thing a person daren't tell unless he wants to pay libel damages. Nobody can do anything dangerous, my dear, except yourself—and sometimes I'm not quite sure about you ! "

" How do you mean—about me ? "

" I mean, honey, that just lately you've been dropping off a bit—like an actor sometimes drops off in the middle of a long run and needs a course of rehearsals to string him up again. You've been too sad. I've noticed that ever since we motored down to Meadoweslow. And, remember, ' Cecile Clare Kissler ' isn't sad. She is dreamy, cool, even casual in her own pretty way, but she is just as gay as a little flower in the spring-time when the sun's shining out. And ' Cecile Clare Kissler ' is a dainty little egoist

—she loves to talk of herself and what she can do, or thinks she can do, or wants to do. *You*, honey, speak of other folk and the interests and hopes of other folk ! And 'Cecile Clare Kissler' draws all the men after her on little chains of silken silliness—not *one* man jest because he—er—happens to *be* one man, but *all* the men who have money enough to be made fools of ! And 'Cecile Clare Kissler' is an American girl, a through and through unrelaxing American girl, and therefore jest a cunning little humbug with the most innocent way in the world. . . . Honey, buck up—go and see Sir Gilbert, and be sure to remember all that I have reminded you about the li-ll-le yellow-haired girl from Iowa ! ”

It was a long sentence, and "Cecile Clare" had listened to every word ; then when Pauline had finished speaking the actress became doubly an actress once more.

Gravity, but gravity which was an obvious shroud for laughter, came back to the corners of her rose-flower mouth ; her wide-open blue eyes grew full of that spurious innocence which is the wickedest make-believe in the world—she swagged—she was ready to "swank"—she obtruded a dainty air of boy-girl dash—in fact, once again "Cecile Clare Kissler" absolutely *was* "Cecile Clare Kissler" !

"I guess your brain's on the cute side, so I'll just keep what you say right in my mind and play up to your advice, my dear !" she drawled, with exactly the right sort of drawl.

"Good !" was Pauline's appreciative response. "And now," she added confidentially (Miss Kray

never missed an opportunity of being confidential, or dropping into whispers of suggested intrigue) "you had better go and talk to Sir Gilbert. I only gave him the *Daily Trail*, and I guess he's got tired of reading about Regulation Butter and proposed inoculation for biliousness by this time!"

"Al-l rig-ht," answered "Cecile Clare," investing each word with an extra syllable before crossing the room, unlocking a blue monogrammed *attaché* box, taking out a small leather case, and—still with the right air of boy-girl swagger—passing out of the pink-curtained doorway.

Then, without any change of demeanour, she entered the drawing-room and bowed to the man who had committed the *bêtise* of kissing her in his own study.

He rose and returned the bow, then they looked steadily and fixedly, more with the air of combatants than possible lovers.

It was a moment when glance was taking the measure of glance, not so much that one was sizing up the other's attitude as that each was wondering what impression the situation was making upon the other.

Of course he was wondering if she was expecting an apology or an avowal.

Of course she was speculating as to whether he would beg forgiveness or maintain the air of a man justified in acting as he had acted.

A full minute passed, then Gilbert spoke stiffly and rigidly.

"I am sorry!" he said.

"I reckon it's quite right for you to be sorry, though Mr. Byne has told me that it's really more my fault

than yours—that you had every reason to expect I shouldn't feel grieved or angry!" answered "Cecile Clare," speaking with a touch of plaintiveness which filled Gilbert with instant suspicion—for in dealing with a woman a man always grows suspicious if he doesn't know what other attitude to take.

Was this an invitation?—a way of making things easy? Had the indignation been merely a species of "draw" which he had not been subtle enough to comprehend?

Yes—yes! Gilbert Frayle told himself "yes," because, probably, only an affirmative response appealed to the natural inclinations which were raging quite riotously within him.

It was quite normal and natural for a young man in his position to take upon his shoulders the responsibility of being (temporarily) in love with a yellow-haired girl on the stage. He had told himself this at least a dozen times before; he had been working up for it, and his mistake of breaking into love-making before he had announced definitely his desire to become a suitably generous and devoted lover was merely a breach of amatory etiquette, that's all!

She had accepted his diamonds. Well, after that he should, of course, have discussed a flat and a car, and a country cottage and a fur coat, before seizing privileges which were not his to seize until terms had been clearly and concisely arranged.

He moved several steps nearer and let his eyes wander all over the pink-and-white and yellow feminine plumpness and slimness and sweetness which was going to serve as such a pretty stop-gap in filling up

the idling and lighter hours of his life until some good woman of his own class appeared upon the scene to put an end to all the follies of free, unfettered manhood.

She was so entirely all he wanted her to be, and this insistence upon the business-like routine of cash before kisses was quite in the picture. She had accepted the diamond bracelet—she had written a short provocative note of thanks—they had been introduced—they had seen a great deal of each other—and then—then he had made the ungentlemanly mistake of allowing his natural inclinations to scramble ahead of sense, fitness, and routine.

But now the mistake could be rectified—very skilfully and daintily she had shown him that, while setting a justifiably high price on her attractions, she would permit him to rectify his mistake.

“I am glad that you acquit me of erring without having a certain amount of provocation to err,” he said, smiling down upon her—actually smiling down upon her yellow head and white bare throat.

“I do,” she answered seriously. “Mr. Byne made me see that my writing that li-lle note jest because I thought it would be fun to write it, and my keeping that bracelet jest the way I kept the black enamel cat, would naturally cause you to think I wasn’t careful or particular—like a young girl ought to be careful and particular whether she’s on the stage or not! But I didn’t think about it being a bracelet that cost so very much money—it jest seemed to me a pretty li-lle gift like the enamel cat. But now I understand, and because I understand I’m going to give you back the bracelet right now, and to ask if you’ll

be so kind as to forget all about it!" And with a small sigh, as if she were relieved at getting something rather cumbersome off her mind, "Cecile Clare" laid the small leather case in his hand.

Gilbert took it mechanically and held it a long way off—as if he were a wax figure between whose curved fingers some playful sightseer had stuck a paper bag of banana skins.

Just at the moment he—not being one of those hustling, lightning-brained men who grasp every possibility and every potentiality in the flare of a magnesium-flash of thought—hardly comprehended the situation.

She had given him back the expensive bracelet—she had given it back to him because, by retaining it, there was a wrong impression somewhere. He didn't want to take it, of course—he didn't want to take it—why should he?

The wax-figure hand was jerking convulsively—it was holding the case half towards her as if it wanted to give back what had been returned.

"You know it's jest like this," drawled "Cecile Clare Kissler"; "if you don't take back the bracelet, I shall know that you want me to feel that I—I—can be treated in any kind of old way—" (here for one second a small, very young laugh) "—also that you don't want to pay me any respect, and that you don't want us to be friends any more! That's the only way of looking at it, you know—*abso-lute-ly* the only way!" And then she smiled at him—a smile that was cool, aloof, and quite friendly.

The wax-figure fingers relaxed, the wax-figure arm

dropped—then the small leather case containing a valuable diamond bracelet was dropped into the jacket pocket of a rigidly-cut dark blue lounge suit.

“ Thank you,” said “ Cecile Clare.” “ Now I guess we can call Pauline and have tea ! ”

He made no reply except to take her white, plump, idle little hand and raise it to his lips.

It was positively the first time he had ever kissed a woman’s hand. As a rule the conventional act of old-fashioned homage didn’t seem worth while.

CHAPTER XIII

THE PRETTY ART OF MAKE-BELIEVE

PAULINE KRAY was reading a long letter when Colonel Raythe was shown into the room.

“ Ah !—*hul-lo !* ” she called out in greeting—and they didn’t even trouble to shake hands.

“ *Hul-lo !* ” responded the Colonel, as he cast one swift glance right round the room—a glance which included the shadowy corner by the piano, the small recess near the fireplace, and the narrow embrasure in front of the window.

Pauline saw the glance, then gave a low-throated diabolical laugh which made her look like a mediæval Italian poisoner.

“ Why the mirth, my dear lady—why the mirth ? ” enquired Colonel George airily.

“ Because it’s no use looking for what isn’t here—she’s busy with the dressmaker, and will be busy for the next ten minutes, so I guess you’ll have to put up with me and my brilliancy for a bit ! ” was Pauline’s perfectly good-natured reply. For having voluntarily got rid of a husband in Dakota, and having voluntarily renounced three excellent opportunities of replacing that liberated gentleman, she felt no ill-will towards

any man who looked round for another woman instead of finding completeness and satisfaction in her uninterrupted society. The really "catty" woman (all apologies to dear furry felines—the comparison is only one of convention and usage !) is she who has never thrown away opportunities on her own account, and who, therefore, has no pleasant sense of satisfaction wherewith to soothe her momentarily wounded vanity.

Retrospective personal triumphs form an effective serum for inoculation against feminine spite.

"My dear friend—" (the Colonel spoke ingenuously, as if he had been trying to catch the drift of a remark that puzzled) "—'she'—who?—and what could be more enchanting than my dear Pauline's society and my dear Pauline's brilliance?"

Pauline laughed again—oh! such volumes of experience, and worldly wisdom, and stupendous comprehension of all humanity's follies and failings and plottings and plannings, in that laugh! It might have been the laugh of the world's first woman who had lived long thousands of years and who had been learning all the while!

"I think the society and the more or less hidden brilliance of someone else's dear 'Cecile Clare' would be more welcome at the moment!" she answered, in tones of amiable friendly malice.

Colonel Raythe shook his head hopelessly, as if conundrums were beyond the range of his mental reach, but his full lids dropped over his delightfully candid blue eyes, while there appeared to be a very small piece of fluff which required flicking off his cuffs.

"And—er—who is the someone else revelling in

possessive rights so far as our dear little friend is concerned ? " he asked, getting away from the region of conundrums and speaking with a new outburst of semi-paternal and interested jollity.

Pauline was merciful this time—merciful enough to keep her worldly comprehension in check and to feign a soothing lack of intuitive observation.

" Well, I don't suggest that there are any possessive rights just at the moment—I was being more playful than accurate. But of course the stiff-backed Sir Gilbert *does* show signs—doesn't he ? " she responded confidentially.

" Does he ? Oh ! well—I daresay he does ! A very decent chap—might seem on the dull-bore side so far as women are concerned, I daresay, but a rattling good chap—quite a rattling good chap ! Ha ! ha ! . . . And what news from away ? " And with this cheery change of topic Colonel Raythe crossed his beautifully trousered legs, looking as if he were more satisfied and more comfortable and more thoroughly at his ease than he had been before hearing the possessive case applied in connection with Sir Gilbert Frayle and Miss " Cecile Clare Kissler ! "

Dissembling is a game for both sexes—the only difference being that women play it like professionals and men like amateurs !

" This ! " was Pauline's response as she held up four sheets of thickly-covered cheap white note-paper—the sort of paper which is always sold at the rural village's one and only general store. . . .

" A good deal of news, I should imagine, by the length of the letter."

"Oh! no—she says it lets off steam to write and tell me how she takes her exile. But in my own mind I believe the hatred is going off, and—but read it, and give me your impression. An old friend and adviser is privileged, I'm sure."

Colonel Raythe manifested a great deal of either sincere or insincere gratification—for it is always difficult to realise if these nice people mean what they say or not!—and took the four sheets of paper in his comfortable white hand.

Then he read, giving vent to either facial or ejaculatory comments as the meaning of each scrawled paragraph was grasped.

First of all he smiled good-naturedly—then he arched his eyebrows and opened his eyes—then he laughed—then he said "*Dear, oh! dear!*"—then he whistled—and then finally he gave a queer rubber-like stretch to his mouth, and returned the letter to Pauline.

"Well, she's doing the best thing she can do, I suppose!" was his first observation when Miss Kray had folded the sheets of paper and slipped them into a beaded reticule.

"Oh! yes—but it's a mistake to want me to go and stay with her."

"I'm not so sure—I'm *not* so sure. If you could all be muddled and mixed up, as it were—get confused with each other—and if she ever—" (here a quick nod in the direction of the door most adjacent to "Cecile Clare's" bedroom) "—were to go down to Harleyshire for a couple of days or so, there would be less chance of subsequent straightening out. When a situation

is at all complicated with concealments and dates and places, I always advise as much muddle and mixing up as possible."

Pauline nodded appreciatively. She was much too clever a woman to do otherwise than appreciate the advice given by any man.

Advice never need be taken, and appreciation is always cheap.

" Does *she*—" (again that nod towards the door) "—know what's going on, and where, and all the rest of it ? "

" Nothing more than she knew at the beginning. As you yourself have counselled, I never encourage her to talk about either Anna Merrick or the real ' Cecile Clare Kissler.' As you and I have both agreed, a make-believe must be so thorough as to deceive the make-believers themselves, and for that very reason I have had to give the li-ll-le girl a li-ll-le bit of a talking to this afternoon. But she's had a trying time of it, poor li-ll-le thing. A grubby-cuffed newspaper man who, it appears, was——can arrange it, of course nothing could be nicer. But then we must give Colonel George the credit for suggesting nice things, mustn't we, honey ? "

It was delicately and artistically done—that breaking off and gliding into a change of subject directly the door opened and a white-frocked, yellow-haired girl appeared on the threshold.

We all think we are supremely skilful when at the moment of being surprised by the sudden entry of an individual under discussion we raise our voices three times higher than they should be raised, and plunge

into hurried strenuous comments concerning the size of a hailstone, the depth of a Henley backwater, or the fluctuation in the price of diamonds.

But that wasn't the way of a woman who had seen most things and done most things on both sides of the Atlantic. *Her* voice was not raised. No, it was dropped into a still lower whisper of confidence as she rolled and guided the middle of one sentence into the middle of another—even giving one small start, suggestive of the idea that it *was* embarrassing for "Cecile Clare" to have entered just at the very moment when Colonel Raythe was forming pleasant plans of the surprise packet variety!

Oh! it was splendidly and tremendously done!

It was the lubricating oil of intuitive diplomacy poured on to the complicated wheels of intrigue.

And it was not bad, it was not vicious, it was not unkind. It didn't hurt anybody, it did not take away any one's reputation, work, hopes, or ambitions. There was no reason why it should not have been done, and, for the sake of temporary convenience, every reason why it should.

Yet by the "catty" woman (again, dear felines, apologies!) with a high sense of moral rectitude, who would turn from her doors a starving mongrel or a betrayed kitchen-maid, Pauline Kray's gentle touch of emollient verbosity would inevitably be labelled as "cunning," "artful," or "treacherous"!

But if we are to live and make things comfortable for ourselves and other people we must be artful and cunning to a certain innocuous degree.

Didn't Abraham's (the always esteemed Father

Abraham !) harmless little deception of persuading his wife to pose as his sister adjust certain difficulties to a nicety ? Wouldn't Jacob (the never-condemned) have missed a most desirable blessing—one which would not have been bestowed at all suitably elsewhere—without a neat display of artfulness ? Was he not also judicious in advising Rachel to purloin the images of Laban ?

Surely, yes ! Therefore we have Biblical precedent for the cunning which smooths away social rucks without tearing any heartstrings in the process !

And "Cecile Clare"—not feeling disconcerted by the knowledge that *her* affairs had been the affairs under discussion—came into the room with the happy assurance of a person quite justified in feeling at her ease.

"I guess we'll give Colonel George jest as much credit as his tailor would give him !" she said, replying to Pauline's last light and airy observation.

And as she spoke she smiled at him—smiled brilliantly, gladly, almost affectionately at one man because she was feeling happy and contented on the subject of another man.

Another man had kissed her hand—and that sort of kiss from that sort of man means homage.

And all at the expense of an absent woman's diamond bracelet !

CHAPTER XIV

IN THE DRESSING-ROOM

AN hour ago "Cecile Clare" did not feel in the least like a girl on the stage, but now as she sat in the big car with the pretty coloured upholstery and the bunch of violets stuck in the centre of the front window she felt exactly like what she was—*i.e.*, a musical comedy actress *en route* for the theatre.

Everything she wore was expensive—shoes, stockings, silken underwear, short soft frock, long black velvet coat, huge Napoleonic black velvet hat, and white fox furs, and the perfume on her infinitesimal hand-kerchief was the latest thing in Parisian olfactory inspirations.

Yes, she was—just at the moment—solely and entirely a Girl on the Stage—one of that slim, fair, young crowd which in the spring-time makes up-West London look like nothing more prosaic than a garden of yellow-headed daffodils.

So very serene, too, and safe she was feeling now. That encounter with Lawson Rolt had caused an uncomfortable emotional jar, but Pauline's philosophy had pointed out the futility of being afraid—therefore "Cecile Clare" wasn't going to be afraid any more.

Also she wasn't going to feel *smirched* any more ! The diamond bracelet had been returned, and Gilbert Frayle had kissed her hand instead of kissing her lips. Of course, if he had kissed her hand *before* kissing her lips there would have been no cause for satisfied self-respect (merely a pretty preliminary to higher and sweeter things, it would have seemed) ; but to kiss her hand *after* he had kissed her lips was a downward movement prompted by elevated intentions.

Gilbert Frayle—Gilbert Frayle !

“Cecile Clare” was not, and never had been, one of those uncomfortable human beings who prod and probe to reach the souls of other human beings—uprooting half-dormant attributes and traits, creating motive out of impulse, drawing deductions when there is nothing to deduce. But in spite of leaving psychology to those interfering analysts who are not blessed with any creative faculty or inventive genius, “Cecile Clare” was able to sum up and classify all the main characteristics and distinctive qualities of the man with whom she was very nearly in love without being in the least aware of her emotional surrender.

Gilbert Frayle was essentially of the type which is created by clean breeding, the public school, the 'Varsity, the county, and convention, and which can be invested with distinction solely by means of some achievement or professional triumph more or less alien to surrounding influences. Leave such a man as Gilbert Frayle to step into a dead father's vacated shoes, and you get one of those stiff-backed products of blameless ancestry which almost (not quite) cause self-made, self-educated oratorical roarers to appear

worth while ; but take away those shoes—thrust him into the arena of science, literature, or invention—and you get a man very much as the World and Woman wants a man to be.

Instinctively “Cecile Clare” knew that with him any dishonourable action or plan would be of the regulation and recognised order which men of his class accept as regulation incidents in the normal progress of events.

Common people he regarded *as* common people, and only invested with such possibilities as are open *to* common people. Stage girls he regarded *as* stage girls, who utilise the boards as an arena in which to display wares of personal attraction waiting to be knocked down to the most desirable bidder or bidders. Women he looked upon as certain factors in the giant scheme of Creation, but factors divided into two absolutely distinct sections—1. Ladies (*i.e.* women whom wives and mothers and sisters might know). 2. *Not* Ladies (*i.e.* women of whose existence wives and mothers and sisters should not even be aware).

Plucky men, plucky horses, plucky dogs (in Sir Gilbert Frayle’s opinion) had every right to exist and receive such consideration as came their way ; but any human equine, or canine coward should be relegated to an office stool, the shafts of a four-wheeler, or a suburban kennel in an eight-foot-square back-yard.

If a man was pleased he shouldn’t show it ; if a man loved a woman of his own class, he should appear only to respect her ; if a man loved a woman out of his own class, there should be as few limits as possible to his financial liberality ; if a man disapproved of

his king, he shouldn't admit the disapproval even to himself ; and if a man met a man who put perfume on his handkerchief or rings on his fingers, there would be every justification for a cut direct.

Yes, without touching upon the story-writer's field of character analysis, "Cecile Clare" had formed an impression of Gilbert Frayle as accurate as it was vague, and well enough she knew that the simple action of kissing her hand *after* he had kissed her lips indicated a change of the position which she herself occupied in a very rigidly-set category.

Instinctively, perhaps, the hand of good breeding was stretched out to meet the hand of good breeding, and without knowing it himself, Gilbert Frayle might be recognising involuntarily that a girl who sang on the other side of the footlights could claim with him (and with any, either extant or defunct, women as well) the kinship of class.

Already it had been demonstrated to him that she was "good" ; and directly a man comprehends unexpectedly that a loved woman is "good," he begins hunting all round for other ideal and worshipful qualities which may or may not exist.

"Goodness" is such a tremendous asset in dealing with the right kind of man. With the wrong kind of man it doesn't matter ; but then, after all, the wrong kind of man need be regarded only as a spoke in the Creator's wheel of splendid inventions !

The wrong kind of man is such a monumental beast—always !

"Cecile Clare" alighted at the entrance to a grimy stone passage leading to the stage door—one of those

inevitable grimy passages which inevitably lead to stage doors, pointing, perhaps, a beautiful moral to the effect that the glitter and glare of Vice is only reachable by means of some sad and sordid approach !

Possibly the moral doesn't quite apply, but it sounds well, and can be placed at the disposal of any deserving tract society in need of "copy" !

"Any letters for me?" enquired "Cecile Clare," smiling prettily and deprecatingly at the stage door-keeper. (For she had learnt that, in addition to weekly tips, the stage door-keeper demands a gentle attitude of half-daughterly respect—anyhow from all those young ladies who have not yet risen to the arrogant heights of being ranked among the "principals!")

"No, miss, not any to-night," replied the gentleman behind the little indoor window.

"Cecile Clare" thanked him, threw one furtive glance at the empty rack marked "K," and then, instead of waiting for an over-crowded lift, ran up three flights of stone steps and reached the tiny unshared dressing-room which another girl's money and influence had caused to be placed at another girl's disposal and—(No, no—there was *not* any other girl! this other girl was a myth, a phantasy, a delusion—and as such she must always be fastened down and suppressed and kept out of the way when vagrant, indiscreet thoughts suddenly started off to reach that dangerous mental territory which is peopled with facts!)

"Cecile Clare" went in, wished her "dresser" a pretty friendly "Good evening," and began to discard the garments of reality for the vestments of make-believe.

Hat, coat, furs, frock, were all taken off and hung up behind the door ; then when "Miss Kissler" was attired in a little limp kimono of pearl-pink silk, and when the "dresser" was busily employed in repairing a small band of frost-spangled swansdown, the process of getting ready began.

The silver chiffon stockings and silver kid shoes with the glittering paste-studded heels were the first details to be settled, after which "Cecile Clare" sat down in front of the looking-glass and proceeded to obscure the natural purity of her skin.

A layer of No. 2—a smearing of No. 11 high on the cheek—a fluff of rouge on the eyelids, ear-tips, and chin—a giant puff charged with creamy powder to soften and spiritualise the *tout ensemble*—drops taken from a liliputian frying-pan (held over a candle in order to melt the caked black grease) and then applied to the tips of long, already-darkened lashes—*feinstes carminschminke* on two half-smiling lips—and then "Cecile Clare's" facial make-up was complete.

But now there was the cowslip-yellow hair to puff and fluff and to droop still lower on the rouge-tipped ears—and there was a band of frosted silver, touched with stage blonde's essential note of blue, to entwine amidst the puffs and curls—and there was the lotion for neck and arms and bosom—and all the rest of the pomades and cosmetics and other baits and danger snares which are set for unwary Man by a special devil well up in all the business of his own special department of devilry, and sold by "Our Only Willy" in Wardour Street !

For all the dozens and hundreds of people whose

profession or business takes them to the working side of the footlights there is nothing noticeably enchanting in the sight of a yellow-haired musical comedy girl getting ready for the show.

But to the ordinary individual who regards the theatre merely as a place where there are velvet-upholstered stalls and boxes and attendants wearing aprons with the waists gathered in some extraordinary region, and an orchestra composed of the most patient and most long-suffering men on earth, the first sight of a lovely girl making herself more lovely in a lovely dressing-room is one bound to leave a radiant remembrance with the artistic enthusiasts on the look-out for impressions.

There was the room—not eight feet square—with white walls, a white dressing-table, a chair and ottoman covered with rose and forget-me-not sprigged cretonne, and a white fur rug thrown across the blue felt floor-covering. On one wall were signed portraits of girls with dazzling smiles ; and men with eyes which were (anyhow photographically) magnetic and compelling ; on another wall dainty French and American pictures—half grotesque, half artistic—some of them prints, some smeary half-finished originals, some of them merely a wandering of eccentric charcoal lines. On the floor, on the shelves, on the window ledge, great bowls filled with all those perfumed half-languid flowers which mean that spring will soon give way to summer in countries that are nearer the sun.

On the dressing-table thick white candles resting in flowered china candlesticks, and surrounded by a *mélée* of paints and powders and pomades and silver

and ivory and looking-glass—and behind the candles, standing like glass-headed sentinels, two colossal crystal bottles—one filled with perfume, green as *crème de menthe* or a jealous woman's outlook upon life—and the other with some rare scented oil, amethyst as the heart of a wood-violet or the eyes of some girl we love to remember when a brown-orbed wife sits at the head of our dinner-table.

The inanimate ingredients of the picture were in themselves a study in dainty effects, and the cowslip-haired, white-necked, silver-shod girl—sitting there and gravely regarding her own vivified beauty in the mirror—provided a central figure in radiant harmony with her surroundings.

It may be inexperienced, suburban, unworldly, ingenuous even, to enthuse over a stage-girl sitting in a theatre dressing-room; but for those who fall victims to the evanescent spell which is cast by a combination of light, tints, and beauty (with all ugly realities kept temporarily out of the way) the stage-girl in the theatre dressing-room makes an appeal which cannot go unheeded.

It is all make-believe, sham, transient, ephemeral—but, after all, life needs its decorations, and actualities can be but rarely regarded in the light of chiffon draperies, Chinese lanterns, or chains of paper roses.

We must be tawdry at times—even in our minds and at our hearts. It is a rest, a relaxation, a rejuvenator—as though once again we had quaffed deeply of ambrosian nectar from Hebe's silver bowl of youth.

“ Oh, dear ! ” “ Cecile Clare ” ejaculated plaintively ;

then, after upheaving the contents of two silver-topped boxes and a silver tray, she turned to the "dresser," who had just finished sewing on the loosened band of frosted swansdown. "I lent Miss Alvernetti my two little blue-headed pins, and I guess she hasn't returned them. Would you just run along down to her room and get them?"

The "dresser" gave a soothing response ("dressers" are always the most soothing people in the world), and hurried away, while "Cecile Clare" slipped into "Snowdina's" frock of glittering white and put the other finishing touches to her toilet.

Never before had she been more anxious to get down on to the stage than she was to-night—never, since the first day of the first rehearsal at the Duke of Carmine's, had she felt more optimistic than she was feeling to-night.

Everything seemed to be going right when certain morals—connected with the sin of make-believe and pretence generally—pointed out that everything ought to be going wrong.

But nothing *was* going wrong. Lawson Rolt had been cowed and bluffed and quieted, therefore all anxieties connected with the past were at rest, while the present and the future—well, those—those—

"Cecile Clare" smiled, "Cecile Clare" pirouetted, and there's no knowing of what other light-hearted ebullition "Cecile Clare" might not have been capable if at that moment the twang of a call-boy's voice had not echoed through passages of stone.

"Ladies for the opening of the first act, please!"

Immediately "Cecile Clare" responded to the call

by opening the door ; for she wanted to get on to the stage—she was in a hurry to get on to the stage—and to look across the footlights to the stalls !

For most extraordinary it is to note how very clearly one particular dark moustache can stand out from among other dark moustaches and beards and whiskers when a Girl-on-the-Stage looks out across the footlights to the stalls !

“ Cecile Clare ” stepped out into the passage, where a group of other young, slim, and painted things were waiting for the lift.

“ Tommy’s on the crawl to-night ! ” observed one slim and painted thing, addressing her *confrères en masse*, and alluding to the Duke of Carmine’s lift-boy, who from the very beginning had never been an enthusiast on the subject of getting from one floor to the other without the maximum waste of time.

“ Tommy’s had the crawl off, my dear—Tommy’s had the order of the red morocco shoe, my dear ! ” was “ Frostinetta’s ” response, made just as the lift shot up with unusual celerity and came to a halt.

“ Mind the step, ladies,” said a voice pompous with the importance of a person whose intention it is to work up a neglected post to a very remarkable standard of initiative and excellence.

The “ ladies ” giggled—just as foolishly and innocently as if they had been so many schoolgirls giggling at a new drawing-master’s mannerisms, and scrambled into the lift.

“ Take us down to the stage, you know, Tommy,” instructed a pretty little pert person whose only drawback was being a brunette (the stage demand for

brunettes grows less and less every day, and even "Our Only Willy" can't metamorphose them all!). "Or perhaps your name *isn't* Tommy?" she added, with something very fascinating in the way of grins.

But the new lift-boy was *distrait*—*distrait* because he was staring—staring hard at one of the pink-and-white faces around which drifted loose puffs of cowslip-yellow hair.

"No—er—miss—" (he grasped the cable—he was trying hard to focus his attention upon the lift and upon the brunette young lady who had put a question) "—no—er—miss, my name's 'Artemus'—always 'as been 'Artemus,' and always will be 'Artemus,' unless—"

Then he broke off—broke off suddenly, because now he was quite certain of what, a moment previously, he had been almost sure.

"And making so bold, Miss Merrick, 'ow's yourself?" he said, touching his cap to "Cecile Clare Kissler" from Iowa!

CHAPTER XV

ELEVATED CHIVALRY

So everything was *not* all right !

Another of those strange coincidences which, in the expert reviewing of fiction, would be condemned as being "strained and improbable," but which, in the normal round of daily life, occur with startling frequency—with such very startling frequency, in fact, that the close observer is sometimes apt to wonder if there might exist any scientific factor which could be known suitably as the "aura of circumstance."

The "aura of circumstance"—a factor charged with the mission of again bringing together certain people and incidents all connected with one particular epoch or event ! The factor undoubtedly exists, even if it isn't recognised.

Yes, a second coincidence to follow a first ! To begin with, a newspaper man who had been the *fiancé* of an hour's duration—now a lift-boy who had been one of the stock figures belonging to the dangerously near past !

And Artemus had recognised her just as surely as Lawson Rolt had recognised her—and now it was necessary to deal with Artemus as she had dealt with Lawson Rolt.

Once again her pluck was gone—she felt as if a second display of bluff was beyond her powers of resource.

All the girls were staring now—Artemus was still staring—something must be done—something must be done !

“ Hullo ! my dear, have you got a little cat of a past tied up in a little bag, and has Lord Artemus let the little cat out of the bag ? ” asked one of the girls—one of the dyed, brazen, and older ones who had long ago got resigned to her perpetual occupation of “ propping up the scenery.”

“ Now we’re going to hear all about Anna Merrick who isn’t ‘ Cecile Clare ’—‘ Wicked little Anna, Who’ll never wave a banner ! ’ ” broke in the pert brunette.

“ I—I— ” “ Cecile Clare ” didn’t know what she was going to say—she couldn’t think what she was going to say, when the lift jerked at the ground floor and Artemus spoke again.

“ I beg your pardon, miss, but now I make a closer survey, I see that the likeness is only what you may call a passing glance, and that you’ve a taller and a better figger—if I may make so bold—than Miss Anna Merrick, the young lady what kep’ company with my cousin up Stoke Newington way ! ” he said, with an air of gravity and penetration that was complete, convincing, and supremely artistic.

The painted girls all tittered, while “ Cecile Clare ” threw one wide-eyed glance of gratitude—like the glance of a frightened kitten whose stolen bone has been concealed from the powers which rule the kitchen.

But Artemus did not take the faintest notice of that glance—not he, indeed ! He had glided them

down to the stage floor ; therefore until it was necessary to ascend again in order to bring down another bunch of yellow-haired and perfumed human flowers Artemus was going to read Mr. Justice Deerest's summing-up in a case brought by the All London Liquid Soap Company against the proprietors of the *Weekly Herald of News*.

Artemus had always entertained a feeling of pleasant comradely appreciation for Mr. Justice Deerest, more, perhaps, because his lordship's jests and witticisms somewhat reminded Artemus of his own jests and witticisms than because Artemus always agreed with the learned gentleman's view of current crime.

Mr. Justice Deerest's humour always caused Artemus to consider the advisability of abandoning lifts and taking up law.

And while Artemus had (apparently) forgotten all about the young lady whom (presumably) he had taken for another young lady, "Cecile Clare's" little silver-shod feet tripped their way from the darkness of the wings to the lightness of the stage, from which—across the footlights and above the bassoon player's bald head—she could see the dark moustache and black tie of Gilbert Frayle.

And all through the piece—from the beginning to the end, when she was singing, when she was doing something unnecessary in order to avert the inelegance of doing nothing, when she was dancing dainty, silly little steps which caused the paste-studded heels to glitter like flashes of electric light—no matter what she was doing or what she was not doing, she saw only Sir Gilbert's dark moustache and black tie, and heard

only the lift-boy's exclamation of "*And begging your pardon, Miss Anna Merrick, 'ow's yourself?*"

How she remembered her lines, and remembered her tunes, and remembered her steps was a mystery—the performance was simply one of mechanical habit and custom ; and when at last she reached her dressing-room after the final drop of the final curtain, it was with the dazed feeling of a person just recovering from the effects of a sedative.

And she was recovering from the effects of a sedative which was more or less the result of one shock following on the top of another shock.

This last shock, too, seemed almost more than her frail feminine nerves could stand, for, while Lawson Rolt had been silenced because there was something to be gained by being silent, the lift-boy with a taste for romantic situations would be bound to make use of his knowledge.

What should she do ?

"Cecile Clare" put this question to herself as she wiped her face with cocoa butter, and answered it when she had changed back from the vestments of make-believe into the garments of reality.

The answer was that Artemus must be paid to continue the same tactful pretence by means of which he had saved the situation in the lift !

"Cecile Clare" dismissed the "dresser," who was always overjoyed to get home to a drunken husband who gave her a black eye every other week-end, and stepping out into the stone passage rang the bell for the lift.

Instantly there was a creak and a clang, and a

moment later Artemus dropped down from higher realms.

"Will you come into my dressing-room for a moment—I want to speak to you?" said "Miss Kissler," displaying all the overdone fearlessness of a person who is immensely afraid.

Artemus touched his cap with a salute that was friendly and respectful at the same time.

"With pleasure, miss. I've always been interested in the drama," he said, by way of explaining his ready acquiescence in a somewhat unusual request.

"Cecile Clare" led the way—Artemus followed. "Cecile Clare" shut the door.

"Now, I guess the best way will be for me to make it worth your while to say nothing, won't it?" she said with a drawl which wasn't at all necessary at the moment.

Artemus appeared to be puzzled.

"To say nothing, miss? What d'you mean? About any princes and other gents as may 'ave a fancy for sending up book-ays and jules and that?" he enquired intelligently.

"No, I reckon you know what I mean right enough—I mean not to say anything about—about *Anna Merrick*!" and with the last two words her very young and very fresh voice dropped into a whisper that might have been one of Pauline Kray's own whispers of intrigue.

"Oh! that, miss! Well, the best of us makes mistakes at times, and I see now as I made a mistake in thinking you was Miss Anna Merrick what kep' comp'ny with my cousin down Stoke Newington way.

You 'ad the way of 'er at first, but I can see now you isn't 'er no more than I am Mr. Winston Churchill ! I 'ope you'll h'excuse me 'aving made the little h'error, miss ! ”

Surely never before had tact and good taste reached such lofty levels of perfection ! Never before had any pretence been so reassuring ; never had any unveracious statement been made with more determination or unyielding strength of purpose.

“ Cecile Clare's ” gratitude was spontaneous—she dived her little hand into a big black velvet bag and brought out half a sovereign.

“ Artenius,” she said, “ please take this with my very best wishes.”

Artemus viewed the coin reflectively.

“ Well, miss, if I may regard this as just a little token of goodwill between a young lady American h'actress and an English lift h'operator, I shall be prepared to accept of your kindness—but in no other way whatsoever ! ”

“ Cecile Clare ” pushed the coin right into the centre of his hand.

“ I guess that's just the way of it, then, Artemus, and I shall always think of you as a friend who can be trusted with a secret ! ”

Artemus saluted.

“ Thank you, miss, yes, I believe I *am* what they call 'Lord Lancy-lot Hyrestairs'—the 'ero in 'Drawn by Honour's Sword' just beginning in *Young England's Weekly*, you know. They call him '*a fearless Briton 'oo with 'ands stained by the h'enemy's gore would keep the h'enemy's secret till death*' ! That's

me, miss—not that you're a h'enemy, miss, and not that you've got no secret for anyone to keep. It's just my character wrapped up in a nutshell, so to speak. Good h'evening, miss, and thank you, and if at h'any time I can be of h'any service, don't forget that England is always ready to stretch out the 'and of friendship to America! Good evening, miss—and thank you!"

And with a final and still more ceremonious salute Artemus went out of the dressing-room back to the lift!

Artemus was one of Nature's gentlemen.

As a rule "Nature's gentlemen"—being too full of scruples and misplaced consciences—are not so successful as Nature's other achievements.

But in the case of the Duke of Carmine's new lift-boy, these customary drawbacks were not markedly in evidence, with the result that a very useful and resourceful article was placed upon the market of human intrigue.

"Cecile Clare" felt that she had found a friend.

She would give him another half sovereign as soon as possible.

CHAPTER XVI

JUSTIFYING A KISS

“RIGHT then—that’s settled! Good-bye,” said a long, lean, copper-faced man with a white moustache and steel-grey eyes full of that sound yet moderated penetration—the penetration that refrains from seeing what doesn’t exist—which years and experience only can perfect.

His name was Lord Mendeslone, and he was chairman of the Great Pyramid Bridge concern.

“Good-bye,” replied Gilbert Frayle coolly, before shaking hands with as little cordiality as possible, and returning to the colossal leather-covered club armchair which he had occupied during a foregoing conversation.

It *was* settled—of course he would go! A decent worker doesn’t begin a job and then leave it for others to finish.

The Pyramid Bridge people wanted the scheme enlarged and elaborated, therefore duty as well as ambition prompted that he should start for the East without delay.

Four or five months—well, even if it was necessary to be away from London for four or five months just

at a time when natural and primitive inclinations would have claimed him within one mile of Southwest Street (not to mention half-a-mile of the Duke of Carmine's stage door !) the inclinations must be set on one side and the kitbags must be packed.

Besides, inclinations—well, after all, inclinations are only among those very middle-class failings which should have no place with matters of national importance.

And the Pyramid Bridge business was a matter of extreme national importance—which, of course, meant that all such trivialities as personal sentiment should go to the wall.

To-day was Tuesday—it would be necessary for Gilbert to start on Friday. There were two whole clear days between Tuesday and Friday, and one half day (to-day) in which to make up his mind.

Sir Gilbert would now proceed to utilise part of that half day in making up his mind.

So he sat as far back in the huge leather-covered armchair as it was possible to sit, lit a cigar, and stared out of the window—stared out at the slush and gloom of St. James's Street on a foggy November afternoon.

And not one symptom of what might be passing in his mind made itself manifest on his face. There was no softening of the eyes, no momentary tenderness of expression visible beneath the inscrutable shield of a gentlemanly moustache—not even a sigh, a half-imperceptible movement of sudden eagerness, to show that he might be thinking the thoughts of a lover.

But he *was* thinking—thinking—thinking—weighing pros and cons—looking on the prudent side, looking on the imprudent side—sizing up all possibilities—taking all eventualities into consideration—till suddenly, in one flash of rose-red folly, the pros and the cons and the possibilities and eventualities were all forgotten and submerged by the rising of Love's stupendous ocean—an ocean which, like the Biblically rising floods of long ago, can sweep away all the ugly landmarks of the world.

Sir Gilbert put his half-finished cigar into an ash-tray, solid and heavy as a paper weight, got out of the immense chair, left the smoking-room, put on his hat after some one else had put his coat on him, and then passed out into the street which, although leading out of Piccadilly and down to a palace, is named after a saint!

And though he was in a hurry to reach his destination, Gilbert Frayle walked—with the idea, perhaps, of exercising a certain amount of moral discipline, which all men take a pride in exercising so long as it doesn't really interfere with their pleasures or their plans.

The moral disciplinarian is such a comfort to himself and such an upholder to his own self-respect. He makes so sure that he never gives way to his own will, and is certain that when he does exactly what he wants to do it is because he has been successful in acting contrary to his own inclinations.

So Gilbert Frayle walked because—while really wishing to walk—he had an idea that he wanted to take a taxi, and when he reached 000, Southwest Street, it was with the pleasant consciousness of having

treated himself with all the severity of a reformatory official exercising an over-rigid sense of duty !

Miss Kissler at home ? Yes, Miss Kissler was at home—she was in the bedroom with the hair-dresser, but if Sir Gilbert would wait, Margot felt quite sure that the operations of the *coiffeur* would soon come to an end.

So Sir Gilbert waited—waited doggedly and almost sullenly—till at last she came in, looking more entirely theatrical than she looked when standing on the Duke of Carmine's stage and informing the stalls that she was “a little snow girl with a little snow heart !”

Her skirt—well, *was* it a skirt ?—was that fulness of soft white satin which left exposed tiny gold Turkish slippers quite undivided, or—or—

But never mind, the blue scanty kimono tea-gown worked in a wonderful design of huge unreal birds reached below the ankles, therefore it was only when a flap flapped or a fold folded over that any alarming sartorial possibilities fully suggested themselves.

Her neck, however, was so bare as to suggest almost a slight *décolletage*, her round arms were uncovered beneath the flapping sleeves, and her cowslip-yellow hair fell down her in a picturesquely unconventional shower of gold.

She looked absolutely a Girl-on-the-Stage !

“ Ah-h ! Hul-lo ! ” she cried impertinently, as she stood a long way off and stretched out her arm right from the shoulder. “ I guess you'll be right-down scandalised seeing me like this ; but if you had to keep *your* hair just two shades lighter than Nature

intended it should be, you'd know what a bother it is!"

He took the small plump hand and held it while gravely and thoughtfully he looked at the little human pink-and-white doll before him.

Heavens! it was madness to think as he had been thinking less than half an hour ago—madness to let himself go because—because—

"Sit right down and talk to me, please—I've been so bored while poor Monsieur Tireau worried around the roots of my hair, that I want quite a lot of entertaining and instructive conversation to make me placid again!" And having given her orders "Miss Kissler" sat down and waited for them to be executed.

Sir Gilbert made a short little sound that did duty for a laugh, and succumbed to the enervating influence of a cushioned lounge.

"I'm afraid I'm too normal to be entertaining and too ignorant to be instructive, therefore I'll confine myself to stating facts. On Friday next I shall be responding to the call of duty by starting for the East! They are enlarging the Pyramid Bridge scheme, and want me over there. I shall be away five months or so."

The statement was badly made and without any unnecessary punctuation, and Sir Gilbert gave a short cough at the end of the sentence.

"My!" was all "Cecile Clare" said—but the exclamation and the twang were so beautifully American that any lack of fluent conversation seemed hardly apparent.

Sir Gilbert glanced down at his nails and found one inequality. (That must be filed down directly he

reached home.) Then he looked over at "Cecile Clare," and as he looked the kimono tea-gown drifted apart to make a suspicion into a certainty.

Beneath the *bizarre* over-frock she was wearing a *jupe-culotte*—her tinted hair was streaming below her waist—her white throat was bare—her white arms were bare—she was a Girl-on-the-Stage, and he had been thinking about her as hostess of a county dinner-party, as a wife suitable to uphold her husband's name with dignity and decorum !

If only she could be what she seemed without being what she *was* !

Yet she was good—she *was* good ! Instinct and circumstance both told him that she was good.

And oh—she was lovely ! She looked so lovely and so young as she now sat staring into the fire ! Her little grave babyish mouth was drooping too—she was sad—her blue eyes suggested tears even if there were no tears actually to be seen there.

And it was because he was going away that she looked sad while trying to seem as if she were not looking sad—because he was going away for five months.

Five months ! Why, in five months a hundred things might happen ! Another man—half-a-dozen other men——

Sir Gilbert Frayle got up from the enervating influence of the cushions and crossed over to the stage-girl sitting by the fire.

"Cecile Clare, will you marry me ?" he said, looking down at the tinted hair streaming over the *bizarre* kimono tea-gown.

She started—she started and looked up.

“ My word, why—why d’you ask me that ? ” she whispered, being for once naturally and spontaneously Yankee at a very great moment of her life.

“ Because I love you, because I want to know that you’ll be quite true to me while I’m away, and because I want to make quite sure that you’ll belong to me when I come back. That’s why I ask you to marry me, my darling ! ”

My darling !

The restrained type of man will hold back a long time, but when at last he lets himself go enough to say “ *My darling* ” that perfect couplet of words sounds at its best.

The “ fresher,” the operatic tenor, the *bourgeois* ratepayer all say “ *My darling* ”—say it often, and either eagerly, ardently, or ponderously; but the normal overdone term of endearment is at its best when spoken by the stiff-backed man who never lets himself go in a hurry.

“ *Cecile Clare* ” heard it, and to her the sound was one of ringing bells.

“ *Five little white mice of Chance,
Shirts of wool and corduroy pants,
Gold and silver, copper and tin,
All for you if you let me come in—
Into the wonderful House of Chance.* ” . . .

Yes, one by one the little white mice were doing their work, and now the little white mouse called Love had nibbled open the best of all the doors in the wonderful House of Chance.

And dare she enter ?—dare “ *Cecile Clare Kissler* ”

who was not "Cecile Clare Kissler," use the passport written out in another woman's name?

But it *was* for her—for *her*! It was *her* chance of being loved—*her* chance of owning and holding and keeping a man who was all that she even wanted a lover of her own to be!

And she mustn't let it go by—no, no—she had taught herself not to let chances go by, and the world had gone better since the lesson had been learnt.

But she wanted to know—she wanted to know how matters stood—and how she was loved and *why* she was loved.

So, sitting quite still in the chintz-covered chair—stiffly upright, with one hand on either arm—she stared up at him out of eyes that were round and black-lashed, blue and earnest.

"And say, do you love me jest because I'm on the stage and making a sort of show that way? You know what I mean? There's 'Cecile Clare Kissler' with her photographs getting around here and there!—well, some young men think it's kind of fine to marry a girl like that. *Is it that way with you, or—or—would you care for me jest as much if I were some sort of ordinary English girl, come from an ordinary good English family, and not meant for the stage or anything like that?*"

Sir Gilbert Frayle tried to keep very grave and non-committal. It would never do for her to know that if she *could* be an "ordinary" English girl not meant for the stage the one black fly in the perfumed ointment of his own love-story would be removed! But

she mustn't know that—besides, it was just the girl herself who mattered ! It is only just the girl herself who ever matters in any sort of revised version of the old King Cophetua story !

“ My darling ! ”—he repeated the conventional term of endearment as though, now once it was said, the words came easily—“ I am not asking you to marry me because you are on the stage or off the stage, or because people interview you and photograph you, or because you're American or because of any other circumstances which—er—just happen to *be*, don't you know. I am asking because you *yourself* are the only individual (apart from my own people) whom I have ever loved, and because my love for you has grown into such a very monumental sort of business that I—I've got to get you if I can ! Will you wait for me during the four or five months I'm away, and will you marry me directly I come home ? ”

“ Yes—I *will* ! ” answered “ Cecile Clare ”—and the three small words were spoken without either a fascinating drawl or an alluring twang.

“ And now I suppose— ” (Gilbert almost laughed, and his voice sounded far gayer and more boyish than the voice of a stiff-backed world-famous young engineer might be expected to sound) “ —if an offence were to be repeated— ”

“ Ye-s ? ” she did drawl then, and looked up at him enquiringly, impertinently.

Then he answered the query note in her voice by lifting her from the straight chintz-covered chair into his arms—right close in his arms as he had, half-

unconsciously to himself, dreamed of holding her and thought of holding her ever since the night of the Dwarfs' and Giants' Fancy Dress Ball.

All his inclinations had been natural inclinations—the natural passionate inclinations of a wealthy and temporarily idle man for a yellow-haired Girl-on-the Stage—and now as he held her closer and closer all those primitive sensations returned.

She was like a little kitten, a little, soft, warm, human kitten, to be kissed and loved as men do kiss and love those little human kittens with round blue eyes—she was the girl who set flames burning at his heart and before his eyes—he only wanted to think of her as belonging to him in the way he had vaguely dreamed she might belong to him.

“Cecile! Cecile!”

He just said her name—said it shortly and thickly—because it is the way of men to call upon a woman's name when there is everything they want to tell her yet cannot find words for the telling.

“Yes?—Gilbert!—Gilbert!” she whispered coolly and serenely.

Her coolness lit new flames of passionate fire. In one hand he held together the massed yellow softness of her sweeping hair, and bent backward her head till his eyes drifted down a white line of chin and throat. Then he bent forward and kissed her—kissed her—kissed her.

“You're mine, aren't you, little Cecile—you're mine, aren't you?” he whispered, the brown heaviness of his moustache still shrouding the flower-red of her mouth.

"Well, I guess I shall be when you get back from the old bridge," she answered.

Then again he remembered that she was to be his wife.

And he was glad—yes, glad, *glad*—to remember that a yellow-haired Girl-on-the-Stage was to be his wife!

PART III

' Chance will not do the work :
Chance sends the breeze,
But if the pilot slumber at the helm,
The very wind that wafts us towards the port
May dash us on the shelves." —SCOTT.

" I remember your hair—did I tie it ?
For it always ran riot—
Like a tangled sunbeam of gold. . . ."

—OSCAR WILDE.

CHAPTER I

AFTER FIVE MONTHS

LONDON—evening time—and the month of May! A combination of season and environment which—provided there is a normal allowance of health, money, and opportunity to be enjoyed—makes an old man middle-aged, a middle-aged man young, and a young man boyish.

Gilbert Frayle—whose age was thirty—felt twenty-one. And it is a glorious thing for a man to feel twenty-one provided he is well and safely past that most objectionable age of arrogant unformed ideas, undecided shoulders, and indeterminate hairs on a sneering upper lip.

Yes, he had reached London, leaving the hard splendour of steel and iron achievements all behind him. A Bridge was growing, growing—he had given it birth and strength and form, and the remembrance of this splendid thing—which had no part with the triumphs of tropical Nature or the wonders of ancient magician-builders of the East—was passionately exhilarating.

But now he did not want to remember this creature of iron and steel which would be still young when a

thousand more suns had risen and set upon stretches of mysterious sand and across tombs and temples and palaces of splendid silent kings—he did not want to remember the painted wonders of Ghizeh—or the God-given patience of humpbacked beasts who, maybe, are the reincarnated spirits of Egyptian kings and emperors who have sinned—or a great mystic mutilated face of stone beneath which the paws stretched out to receive the sacrifices of a world which is fast learning to forget the glory of sacrifice.

At his heart there was no desire for recollection. Towards the past—even the immediate comprehensible past, as well as towards the unconquered, inscrutable past—he was unconsciously antagonistic, as is the way of humanity when humanity is feeling twenty-one and when the future holds everything which matters.

And now as—after arriving at a terminus, and dining, and dressing, all in less than an hour—he made his way to the Duke of Carmine's theatre, Gilbert Frayle knew that the future did hold everything which mattered, simply because it held his own complete possession of a girl whose hair was yellow as primrose sundawns over the Nile, and whose eyes were blue as a midday Orient sky.

It was five months since he had seen her, touched her, or spoken to her, and their letters had been more or less brief and infrequent, as are the letters of people who have things to do in a world where so many people do nothing at all—but yet in spite of absence having been comparatively unbridged-over by links of circumstance, Gilbert Frayle felt nearer to “Cecile Clare Kissler,” more in need of “Cecile Clare Kissler,”

more bound to "Cecile Clare Kissler" than when the daily touch of lips and hands had been sweet and close.

He wanted "Cecile Clare Kissler"—he wanted his wife! It didn't matter that she was a yellow-haired Girl-on-the-Stage—he wanted her for his wife!

And, wanting her for his wife, it was his definite determination that she should become his wife just as quickly as legal formulæ could be induced to change two persons into one person.

She would be surprised to see him—it was extraordinarily stimulating to know that she would be surprised to see him, because "Cecile Clare" looked seraphic when she was surprised.

What would she say? Well, probably she would say: "My! I guess I didn't know you were coming along so soon!—why didn't you write and tell?" . . . Yes, that's what she would say; and then he would kiss her while she rested passively in his arms—for "Cecile Clare" was young enough and sweet enough and desirable enough to remain passive while the arms of a lover held her close.

It is always a sign of fascination's decadence, a sign that personal allurements are becoming frayed at the edges and worn, when a woman meets passion and ardour half-way. More than two-thirds of her power is gone directly she ceases to hold back. In love it is the holding back which is in reality the leading on!

When Sir Gilbert reached the stage entrance he walked right in, and let the rickety old glass-paned door bang behind him with all the fearless freedom

of a man who can tip and who is ready to tip everybody who shows the least wish or desire to be tipped.

He paused before the little indoor window and spoke authoritatively to a hare-lipped youth who, in the temporary absence of the stage-door keeper and his deputy, was left in charge.

“ Has ‘ Miss Kissler ’ arrived yet ? ”

“ Mith what, thir ? ”

“ ‘ Miss Cecile Clare Kissler.’ ”

“ She’th away, thir—been away ill in the countrhy for the last two or three months ! ”

“ ‘ Miss Kissler ’ away ill ? No, no, there must be some mistake.”

“ No, thir, there ain’t no mithtake, becos—yeth, whatherwant ? ” (This interruption was addressed to another youth—a cute and dignified youth who bore himself with the official air of a person who felt he ought to be wearing a uniform even if he wasn’t.)

“ Miss Dalmancy sent this letter down to be given to Captain Mostrim when he calls,” said the dignified youth, handing in a blue envelope addressed in red ink

“ All righth.”

“ And don’t you forget it, or else there’ll be something to be paid by somebody.”

“ All righth ! —and—’ere—I thay ! —I thay, Artemuth ! ”

The dignified youth—who had nearly gone—almost returned.

“ Yes, nipper, what is it ? ”

“ Mith Kithler ’ *ith* away, ithn’t the ? Thith gentleman wanth to know ! ”

Artemus took stock of the gentleman—and approved.

There was an air of definite authority about the gentleman which Artemus knew to be the right thing.

“ ‘ Miss Kissler ’ ’as been indisposed, sir, and staying down in the country this last two—or nearly three—months, sir ; but she came back the day before yesterday fully restored to ’ealth, I am pleased to state ! ” he announced, addressing Sir Gilbert after throwing one glance of lenient contempt in the direction of the deputy stage door-keeper’s *pro tem.* deputy.

Sir Gilbert nodded, tipped the lift boy, tipped the *pro tem.* deputy boy, and turned away.

It had been his intention to send up a note or card acquainting “ Cecile Clare ” with the fact of his return ; but now, for some reason which was hardly a reason at all, that intention had changed. Instead, he would watch part of the show and then go round to Southwest Mansions, wait until “ Cecile Clare ” returned, and then surprise “ Cecile Clare.”

There would be a good deal of rapture to be experienced in the surprising of “ Cecile Clare.”

Sir Gilbert took a seat, and from the dark obscurity of the last row of the dress circle watched the girl who had ousted that good dream-woman of his own class whose white long-fingered hand was, in due course, to have smoothed away all the riot ruts of his normally immoral bachelor life.

But now he had no place for any good dream-woman of his own class—no place at all, and all because of this little girl who sang with the plaintive sweetness of a spring-time robin before dancing dainty, easy little steps which displayed the glitter of tapering paste-studded heels.

And as he had watched her fifty times before so he watched her to-night, finding—at least so it seemed to eyes that were weary for the sight of cowslip-yellow hair and the young curves of rose-pink cheeks—a new and gracious dignity, an air of sweet half-plaintive weariness which had been absent before he went away.

Even though there were grease layers on her face, and grease blobs on the ends of her eyelashes, and grease streaks on her lips, and although she sang little songs which might possibly have meant a great deal more than they appeared to mean, and although her swansdown-trimmed skirt was not of the swathing and concealing variety, Gilbert Frayle—looking from the gloom of the dress circle down on to the brightness of the stage—could see suddenly the ideal young hostess presiding over a country dinner-party composed of canons and bishops and landed gentry and generals and admirals—each and all accompanied by a rigid, virtuous, unwaved, uncurled, unpowdered wife !

“Cecile Clare Kissler” was a yellow-haired Girl-on-the-Stage, but she was something more besides.

Towards the middle of the last act—just as the Aeroplane Girl was about to conclude matrimonial arrangements with a Martian Duke instead of with a ruling prince from the Milky Way territory—Gilbert got up, trod on a selection of middle-class dress-circle toes, left the theatre, and taxied to Southwest Street, speculating as he went on the subject of “Cecile Clare’s” two or three months’ absence from the theatre.

Why had he not been told that she was ill ? Why had she not when writing one of her brief infrequent little notes said she was writing from the country ?

And what part of the country? Where had she been staying in the country?

Gilbert asked himself these questions almost without knowing he was asking them—for the type of man who never lets himself go would not wish to commit the emotional indiscretion of betraying mental curiosity even to himself. That type of man is very punctilious about his own opinion of himself.

The taxi hurried, and Gilbert reached the flat a quarter of an hour before midnight.

"Good evening!" he said, speaking almost pleasantly when Margot opened the door.

Margot made a little two-syllabled exclamation that was entirely French, welcoming, and astonished!

"Ah!—sir!—'Miss Kissler,' how it will be surprise for her!" she cried, as Gilbert stepped into the hall.

"Yes, I expect it will. I didn't think I should be back before next week. How is 'Miss Kissler' now?"

"Ah, sir, she is much better now—quite well and better now—but she was so not-well and feeble and four time fainted before ze doctor said she must be with the air of the country."

"I haven't heard anything about it—I ought to have been told."

"Ah! sir, but 'Miss Kissler' is not like those ladies who have wish to make fuss every time. She know, too, that you would fear much if you hear she was ill, so she go away quiet and get well."

"Of course—oh yes! Er—do you know when 'Miss Kissler' went?"

Margot hesitated for one second in order to look

bird-like and intelligent; then she answered very glibly,

“ Yes, sir—yes, sir, ‘ Miss Kissler ’ and Miss Kray went to Trevillen—right away in Cornwall where the air was warm and there was sea. ‘ Miss Kissler ’ have come back so well and so strong that she say she can eat one whole chicken altogether! Ha! ha! . . . You will please wait, sir—and to please excuse if there is disorder, for, with the coming back of ‘ Miss Kissler ’ and then the coming back of Miss Kray, there has been much things everywhere. Thank you, sir—if you will please to be seated ‘ Miss Kissler ’ will not be many moments—thank you, sir! ”

But Sir Gilbert did not “ please to be seated ”: on the contrary, when the door was shut with insinuating noiselessness he more “ pleased to ” walk about the room—to walk restlessly, as if there was something on his mind which induced unnecessary action of the body.

So “ Cecile Clare ” had been to Trevillen in Cornwall (Gilbert had never been to Trevillen)—and Pauline Kray had been with her!—yet the excellent and soothing Margot had spoken of first the “ coming back of ‘ Miss Kissler,’ ” then the “ coming back of Miss Kray,” as though the two events were not synonymous.

For one moment Sir Gilbert permitted himself the emotional luxury of a frown, but a second later his face had become once more inscrutable as a great mutilated stone face which had been left behind in the desert while he continued to drift aimlessly about the room.

Margot was right—disorder seemed in some vague fashion to pervade the whole place, and not the delicious disorder of art so much as the normal unbeautiful disorder attendant upon domestic upheavals of sorts.

A large luggage-strap coiled snake-like across the white fur mat; a travelling-rug made a blot upon a rose-strewn chintz chair cover; a large cardboard box—labelled RICKFORD'S EXPRESS DELIVERY, tied up with string and addressed—

Gilbert paused and stood still.

The large cardboard box claimed his attention, because the address written on the lid happened to catch his eye.

MISS KRAY,
c/o 'MISS C. C. KISSLER,'
WREN COTTAGE,
LIDMONTON,
HARLEYSHERE.

What did the box mean? Well, it meant that while she was away Pauline Kray had received a parcel which there was no need to open, and which had, in consequence, been brought back just as it was sent.

Yes, obviously it meant all that, but—but—what more besides?

Well, it looked as if it meant that there was some mistake in Margot's information—as if, instead of staying at Trevillen in Cornwall, "Cecile Clare" had been staying at Lidmonton in Harleyshire!

Probably this was the case. Probably—probably—

But at "probably" it stopped—there was no time for further conjecture—for no man on earth could conjecture anything when standing in the doorway was a girl, a serious-eyed cowslip-haired girl whom the man had every reason and every right to take straight and close in his arms !

CHAPTER II

FOLLOWING UP TRAILS

THERE is a moment in the life of every woman—that is to say every woman not belonging to the cow-and-turnip type of femininity—when she falls in love with her lover.

It is a very important moment. It may come before he falls in love with her ; it may come when they have been lovers for years—years which had seemed full of complete devotion on both sides ; it may come on the first or the fifth anniversary of their wedding day (never later than that !). But whenever it comes it makes an era, and invests both the present and the future with an entirely new aspect.

And the moment when “Cecile Clare Kissler” fell fully in love with her lover was the moment of surprise when she stood in a curtained doorway and found him waiting in a somewhat disorderly drawing-room.

There were certain things she noticed then that she had never noticed before—an odd attractive narrowing of the eyes, for instance, the way in which his hair grew at the sides of his forehead, a strong stiff habit of jerking his shoulders, and an air of breathless

restraint which might suggest a hundred raptures to the woman who loved him.

Yes, she noticed all these—she noticed *him* as she had never really noticed him before—and with the observation she grew up fully, because she had fallen in love fully.

The babyishness of her face and hair and figure still remained, but the babyishness had all gone out of her heart.

She was a grown, developed woman, because she loved a man completely, and was ready to belong to a man entirely.

“ ‘Cecile,’ I’ve come back ! ” he said.

“ Y-es, I guess I see you’ve come back,” she answered—and then followed the inevitable embrace, one of those tempestuous over-passionate embraces which mean that absence has been wearisome and fidelity complete.

But though she loved him—loved him fully and fervently and definitely—“Cecile Clare” still held back, putting between them that invisible wall of limitations by means of which a man’s climbing instincts can alone be kept alive.

Her pretty plumply-slim figure yielded sometimes to the close holding of his arms, but before the yielding was a realisable fact there was a return of delicate stiffness and delicate aloofness to be reconquered. Her little curving red-flower mouth was at one moment a prize secured and held, but the next—oh ! the red flower was inaccessible once more, and the chase for possession must begin all over again !

“ And why didn’t you tell me that you were ill,

that you had to go away ? " asked Gilbert when, with a ridiculously prim little gesture, " Cecile Clare " had slipped out of his embrace to sit down among the cushions on the lounge.

Of course he sat down beside her.

" Oh ! I—er—" she was vague for a moment, then query answered query. " But who told you that I had been sick ? "

" They told me at the theatre—and Margot told me."

" Oh-h ! "

" Darling, why didn't you let me know ? "

" I didn't see any use in writing that I was run down and taking iron and fainting. I thought you just might sort of think you were sorry and worried, so I told my pen not to give me away when it got down on to the paper. Wasn't that the best way, n-o-w ? "

The drawl of the last word was so exaggerated that Gilbert wanted to kiss her again—for when a red-flower Yankee mouth drawls in just the right way every syllable is a positive call for kisses !

But " Cecile Clare " was still rigid and aloof, so for the time being Gilbert thwarted his natural inclinations.

" You went to Harleyshire, didn't you ? "

He put the question heedlessly, and without any idea that the name of a locality written on a card-board box was lingering in his mind. He was thinking so much of her that all other ideas were, for the time being, an indistinguishable *mélée*.

But when there was an unnecessary pause, when he glanced round to find that she was looking at him—

looking at him as if she were *afraid*—Gilbert remembered that he had made a mistake.

“ No—I—I was fixed down at Trevillen in Cornwall,” she answered slowly. Then she waited—and finally put a question. “ What made you think it was Harleyshire ?”

It was Gilbert’s turn to hesitate, but a hesitation which only ended in a brief, brusque statement of facts.

“ That box over there—I amused myself by looking at everything while I was waiting for you.”

“ Cecile Clare ” got up, walked to the other end of the lounge, then laughed—laughed somewhat as a likable girl-baby laughs when a new and specially seductive indiarubber “ comforter ” is pushed between its gums.

“ I guess you’re playing detectives and following up trails,” she answered slowly ; “ so the best thing—*Hullo* ! my dear ; he’s come back and he’s following up trails ! ” she broke off, as Pauline Kray suddenly came in the room just at the very precise moment when it was particularly convenient for her to come into the room.

“ Why ! My ! You ! Well, I wish I had a sweetheart who’d turn up like an automatic man out of a box just when I was feeling lonesome and wanted some one to trot me around ! ” was her greeting, as she shook hands with all the cordiality of a woman who doesn’t in the least dislike a man because he happens to be another woman’s man.

Gilbert wasn’t stiff, but his cordiality didn’t equal hers.

“ And what’s this about trails ? ” she enquired,

when the black flash of her eyes had met the blue flash of "Cecile Clare's."

"Why-y-y" ("Cecile Clare's" drawl lasted until she reached the cardboard box), "this Mr. Sherlock Holmes person thinks I've been at Harleyshire instead of down at Trevillen all because of *this*! What size that for cuteness, eh, my dear?"

Pauline looked long enough and laughed long enough to give herself time—then she rattled out the explanation with the concise tolerance of one particularly clear-headed person who feels an immense amount of genial contempt for foggy delusions of another person who is not at all clear-headed.

"My dear gentleman, *because* I went down to Harleyshire for one week-end to visit an old friend who lives at Lidmonton—and *because* I told my little oddment dressmaker to post off a blouse right down there—and *because* the little oddment dressmaker imagined I was staying with Miss Cecile Clare Kissler, and, being of a liter-*ary* and punctilious turn of mind, thought she'd write as much as could be got on the box—and *because* the blouse arrived so late that I brought it back without opening it—well, *because* of all those little mixed-up circumstances I hardly see why you should imagine that a good li-ll-le girl has been occupied with dark and wicked deceptions!"

Gilbert listened to the whole of the sentence, appeared suitably and politely amused by its volubility, and achieved something very successful in the way of a laugh directly Pauline had come to a full stop.

"*Mea culpa!*!" he observed conventionally.

"Well, I just guess you should *culpa*, so I take my

blouse and go, and leave 'Cecile Clare' to tell you all about her dark doings down in Harleyshire!" and without waiting for Gilbert to open the door or pretend that he didn't want her to go Miss Kray left the lovers to their solitude of two.

Gilbert looked at "Cecile Clare," and as he looked the surging tumult of his natural inclinations rose once more to swamp the boundary lines of prudence and all spiked hedges of half-formed suspicions.

He couldn't think of anything to do with her that was not actually *her*. She was such a little thing as compared with the giant-women of to-day, and as she was such an exquisitely-formed little thing five feet four inches didn't need any additions. And her cowslip-yellow hair was so like the yellow hair of a baby (one of those picture-babies of the rich who win prizes in pictorial competitions)—and her blue eyes were so like the innocent blue eyes of a white fluffy kitten who means to steal a sardine directly it gets the chance—and her little mouth, her little red-lipped mouth curling above and below tiny teeth—

Gilbert went right up to her—it was one of those moments when distance cannot be tolerated.

"Will you be ready to marry me in three weeks?" he said.

"Well—y-e-s—I guess I might!" she answered, looking at him with an aloof air of serious introspection.

And the distance between them existed no longer.

CHAPTER III

THE DEMON DOUBT

THINGS grow—not meaning plants and children and puppies so much as ideas and notions and suspicions. And when a suspicion grows, not only on its own account, but is also fed by little tricklings of circumstance, it is apt to assume proportions of a somewhat interfering and unlimited nature.

Harleyshire !

Gilbert couldn't get away from the idea, or when he did get away from it there was a flickering breath here or a floating breeze there which brought up various disturbing notions and semi-suggested possibilities.

Was it merely a coincidence that Le Trainu and Rogerson should have mentioned the golf links at Harleyshire and glanced at Gilbert, and asked Gilbert if he knew the course ? Probably yes !

Was there anything behind old General Treed's visionary warning upon the subject of hasty marriages and unproved pasts ? Possibly no !

Was Betty Krewster being sinister when for no particular conversational reason she asked him if he knew the Meredith-Laynes who had a place just outside Harleyshire ? Probably no !

Quite probably, most probably—all of it—every-
thing! Just accident and coincidence all the time!

But in spite of probabilities, accidents, and coinci-
dences, the name of Harleyshire crept through the
recesses of Gilbert Frayle's mind like a serpent spitting
poison as it went.

He was always thinking about Harleyshire, hating
himself for the thought, yet unable to banish it for
more than a couple of days at a time.

And "Cecile Clare Kissler" was going to be his
wife. She would be the mother of children born to
inherit a name which ancestors had kept clean, decent,
and white all through, and which he himself had
brought into the clear penetrating light of fame.
And when a woman was going to be the mother of
exceptional children (such as racial conceit guaranteed
without any doubt that his children must be) it was
so desperately necessary to make quite, quite sure.

After all, what did he know about "Cecile Clare
Kissler"? Nothing beyond a few picturesque details
which had appeared in an occasional weekly paper
on the brink of liquidation, and a fact or two which
formed part of his own experience!

The picturesque details? . . . Well, that
"Cecile Clare Kissler" was the daughter of an Epis-
copalian clergyman out in Iowa, and that "Cecile
Clare Kissler" had been financed by a godmother
and sent over to England in order to make a name
for herself on the musical comedy stage.

And the facts answered for by the satisfactory
medium of personal experience? . . . Well,
that "Cecile Clare Kissler" was intensely and

extraordinarily lovely, desirable, and adorable: that in the very beginning "Cecile Clare Kissler" had kept a diamond bracelet and written a provocative little note; that, later on, "Cecile Clare Kissler" had returned the diamond bracelet after showing that her sense of decorum had been outraged by the insult of a kiss offered by a host under his own roof; that the purity of "Cecile Clare Kissler's" soul appeared to shine out clearly through the blue of "Cecile Clare Kissler's" eyes.

So much for details and facts which, although being more or less unverified and meagre, would have satisfied all love's demands had not circumstance and suspicion stepped in to throw shadowy cloaks of doubt over all these pretty pictures of the past and of the present.

"Cecile Clare" had been away from the theatre on sick leave for nearly three months; Gilbert had not been informed of the illness or absence; Pauline Kray was supposed to have been with "Cecile Clare" all the while; according to statements made and insisted upon "Cecile Clare" had been staying at Trevillen; according to the address written on a cardboard box "Cecile Clare" had been in Harleyshire; according to heedless inferences given and received the return of Pauline Kray and the return of "Cecile Clare" had not been simultaneous.

And if "Cecile Clare" had lied, if "Cecile Clare" had been at Harleyshire instead of Trevillen, *why* had she been there? What had she been doing? Who had been her companion? Who—

And when a stream of mental questions begins to

flow there is no telling what sea of pestilential murkiness may be its destination.

Good heavens ! suppose that "Cecile Clare" had been playing low-down all the time ! Suppose that a drifting rumour here, a whispered breeze there, were correct ?—suppose that there *had* been a secret lover (a lover loved for love's sake !) almost from the first week of "Cecile Clare's" arrival in England—suppose that it were true !—Good God !—Good God ! *Suppose that it were true !*

There came a moment when Gilbert Frayle's mood was one of frenzy—the suppressed frenzy of a habitually unemotional man, which is devastating as the currents of a smooth-surfaced whirlpool.

It was possible that he was being made a fool of (not, of course, that he had insisted upon making a fool of himself !)—that if he married "Cecile Clare," Society, the good dull county neighbours, and the very children born to inherit a decent name would be being made fools of as well !! . . .

There was that chap Bressell, who on returning from Russia last week had begun to speak of "Cecile Clare Kissler" until the frown of another man and an interpolating announcement of his (Gilbert's) approaching marriage had changed an outbreak of spicy gossip into an explosion of jerky congratulations.

What was it that Bressell had been going to say ? What was it—what was it ?

Gilbert got up and went into the billiard-room—for it was while sitting in the club smoking lounge that a sudden and final frenzy had attacked him, the result of that frenzy being that he was now prepared

to act like one of nature's cads instead of like one of civilisation's gentlemen.

He would make enquiries, he would actually ask questions concerning the woman who had promised to be his wife ! It was a petty atrocious sort of thing to do, but in the interest of those decent little unborn sons and daughters it must be done. It's a man's duty to play fair with his children, even before they are brought into the world !

So Sir Gilbert Frayle walked straight into the billiard room and straight up to a fat-faced red-haired man who was waiting for another man who still required thirty for game.

" Bressell, do you mind telling me what you know about Miss Kissler ? " was the unembellished method of opening the attack.

Bressell looked horribly alarmed, as a man always looks when there seems any likelihood of his being dragged into the affairs of another man and his women-folk.

" My dear old chap," he replied, as they stepped up into one of the surrounding alcoves, " I—er—it's beastly awkward, don't you know—I haven't got any exclusive information of any description. I—I was a bit mixed up with Dolly Tremoyne and that crowd before I went away, but stage rumours about stage people are never worth very much, don't you know ! "

" Of course—quite so—but whatever rumours you have heard I want to hear. Place yourself in my position, and realise if it is not very, very necessary for me to know everything which should be known."

This was a direct appeal, and as Algar Bressell was a man who understood family obligations he responded.

"Well—er—of course without any doubt the whole rumour *was* rumour—it was only that Cecile Kissler was supposed to be running an affair—quite a *sub rosa* affair—of love-without-lucre, don't you know—with an artist chap called Norvedson. Dolly Tremoyne insists that one Sunday she went to see them at Lidmonton—some place in Harleyshire, where they were supposed to spend the week-end—but, my dear old boy, these girls talk such imaginative tosh that probably there isn't a word of truth in the whole scheme, don't you know!"

Gilbert nodded.

"Quite probably—not a word of truth—but I'm much obliged to you for telling me," he answered impassively; then, after the exchange of a few forcedly casual remarks, Algar Bressell took down his cue, while Gilbert left the billiard-room without any apparent haste whatsoever.

But in reality his haste was tremendous—tremendous!

Without a moment's hesitation there must be a taxi to Euston—lunch either at the station or aboard the train—and then the couple of hours' run to Harleyshire.

Harleyshire! That was the only thing to be done!—there was no way of finding light (or darkness!) outside Harleyshire—outside Wren Cottage, Lidmonton Harleyshire!

Therefore a taxi was called and into it stepped a

tall, moustached man, wearing a light overcoat and betraying neither more nor less emotion and neither more nor less interest in life as it moved around him than is usually betrayed by other tall, moustached men belonging to the class which never gives away anything of its soul down on earth.

Those moments of inward turbulent frenzy were over: his methods were now calm and deliberate, and his purpose firmly set.

It was due to the future that his purpose should be firmly set.

* * * *

“ Lidmonton—Lid-mon-ton !! ”

The porter shouted clearly, and as the station was small and the surrounding atmosphere tranquil his voice carried from one end of the short platform to the other.

Gilbert stepped out of a first-class carriage, threw away the remainder of a cigar which deserved a better fate, and spoke to the porter.

“ At what time is the next train back to town ? ”

“ Due in ten minutes, sir ! ”

“ Well, then, the one after that ? ”

“ Due in two hours, sir—at 5.35.”

“ Thanks. Do you know where I can find a house called ‘ Wren Cottage ’ ? ”

“ Yes, sir, I *do* 'appen to know, sir. Straight up the 'ill, sir, when you leave the station, across Plane Road, up the rest of the 'ill, turn to the right, and walk along the footpath to the fields till you come to it, sir. It's a brown-coloured 'ouse, sir, with a large

white gate and a pump to the left. Thank you, sir, thank you, sir—thank you!—thank you, sir! . . . Lid-mon-ton—! Right! ”

A flag fluttered, the train heaved a steamy sigh—the locomotive's protest against endless miles of England!—and Gilbert Frayle left a station to climb a hill.

An extraordinarily steep hill it was, without any restful divergings to the right or to the left; but as Gilbert was “fit” (of course he was “fit,” a man of his type would as soon be unbathed as not “fit”!), and as there was a poignant interest waiting at the top, his ascent was steady if not unscientifically rapid.

On he went, holding his shoulders erect yet stooping his body—on past a village post-office, a village butcher, and a village public-house—across a road hewn out and set in the bosom of the hill—on and up again till the sweet exuberant air of high heights was reached.

For a moment Gilbert paused. He was not imaginative (the idea of transient imaginativeness would have revolted him); but as he stood in the centre of a white chalk road, surrounded only by the purity of sky and breeze and grass, it seemed impossible that any ugly discovery could be waiting ahead.

But he pulled himself together. This touch of sickly sentimentality—this dragging nature into a matter of purely personal interest—was feeble and feminine. The sky and the grass and the breeze had nothing to do with a yellow-haired American musical comedy girl and an artist named Norvedson.

He had come to seek for facts, not to gather fanciful impressions.

He would go ahead.

So he went ahead, and found the brown house and the white gate and the pump just as the porter had promised he should find it—with the addition of a pond, an apple tree, and a weather-stained rustic seat, not guaranteed by the railway official in question.

This was Wren Cottage—it was here that a cardboard box, addressed to "Miss Kray, c/o Miss C. C. Kissler," had arrived.

There was an air of rest and health and sweetness about the whole place. White-frilled curtains in every window, spring flowers in little crescent-shaped beds on either side of the creeper-grown porch—everywhere the sentimental fragrance of lavender without one single whiff of the actual perfume itself.

Gilbert went through the gate, past the pump and the seat, and knocked at the door. He was feeling rigid with nerves. He appeared to be rigid with lack of imagination.

The door was opened—and by a woman whose cheek-bones were set high and teeth perfect. She wore a blue apron, and though her face was young her bosom was motherly. She suggested the idea of being a clean-souled creature who regarded maternity as the sole and supreme reason for everything.

"Good-day, sir," she said, with a smile that was quite suitable and cheerfully kind.

"Good-day," replied Gilbert stiffly and shortly, but with that particular order of stiffness and shortness which any man or woman who has seen service in

good families would never dream of resenting. "Can I see Miss Kissler—Miss Cecile Clare Kissler, who I believe is staying here," he added calmly.

"Well, sir, I'm sorry, sir, but you're too late. Miss Kissler left three days ago."

"Did she? That was earlier than she expected, wasn't it?"

"It was, sir, but Miss Kissler hadn't picked up quite so quickly as the doctor hoped, and the baby was fretful, so the nurse and all went off to the seaside for a fortnight instead of staying out the rest of their time here as had been their original intention. I told Miss Kissler she was getting away too soon after her confinement, but these young ladies on the stage will have their own way when they think they will, won't they, sir?" was the explanatory response given by the mistress of Wren Cottage, Lidmonton, Harleyshire.

It was a good thing that Gilbert Frayle had come to Harleyshire.

Now he *knew*!

CHAPTER IV

THROWN UP !

“ ARTEMUS ! ”

“ Cecile Clare ” called the lift-boy to the door of her dressing-room, and the lift-boy came.

“ Artemus, are you pleased with your present post ? do you like the work you’re doing ? ” she enquired, saying what she wanted to say with that most desirable directness which saves so much loss of time. It is an American characteristic (though perhaps she didn’t know it) to “ get right there ” so far as words are concerned.

“ Well, miss, I can’t say as I likes it or dislikes it, so to speak. Of course I gets a bit tired of opening the door and shutting the door, and of ‘earing folks with a taste for humour make jokes about me ‘ *reaching great ‘ights* ’ and ‘ *going up in the world* ! ’ Them jokes is tiring, specially when one feels it would be an ungentlemanly action not to laugh as if it was the first time they’d been made. Yes, on the ‘ole, miss, I don’t believe I should be sorry to give up the elevator profession and to take on something where there was more scope,” was the lift-boy’s reply.

“ Would you like private service—to be trained for a footman or a butler, you know ? ”

"That's what I *should* like, miss ! A gentleman's servant always gets so much scope, and there's always a chance of saving the family's honour, like the butler in 'The Lord of Motor Grange' now coming out weekly in *Every Lad's Companion*. The butler, too, what gave hevidence in the Turntwill murder case (Mr. Justice Bletcham was the judge that day)—my word, 'e 'ad some scope to show 'is pluck, miss ! Yes, miss, I *should* like private service, miss."

"Th-en," drawled "Cecile Clare," "you shall have it, Artemus. I will speak to Sir Gilbert. It's only fair I should do what I can for you, Artemus—you've been a friend to me, and I don't forget friends ! "

"Thank you kindly, miss, I shall always be proud to remember that an American young lady—a young lady from a sister continent, so to speak—called me a friend !" was the sturdy response of Artemus, the ex-lift boy at the Automatic Change Delivery Company's premises in Cornhill !

Artemus was nothing if not thorough—thorough, even, in his capacity for pretence. And to be thorough in our pretences is even more useful than being thorough in our sincere beliefs !

When "Cecile Clare" had shut the door and begun to dress a sudden mood seized her by the shoulders and gripped her hard. It was a mood which, ever since her return to the stage after an absence of over ten weeks, had been gradually striving to take possession of her emotions.

She hated the stage !

She hated the stage and everything and everybody connected with the stage.

The glamour of grease-paint and limelight had gone, leaving behind a strange dull feeling of physical and moral lassitude.

She had not been intended to take life lightly as girls on the stage take life ; she had not been fashioned of the easy-going stuff which causes a woman to be late for every appointment, which puts glib lies on her lips whenever a lie seems likely to serve any trivial or important purpose, which makes life a matter of finance or Heidsieck, and which obscures every impulse which is not rigidly governed by that supreme deity called Ego.

She had played a game, and now that it was time for the game to finish—her capacity for pretence was almost at an end.

In a week's time the real Cecile Clare Kissler would return—in a week's time the make-believe "Cecile Clare Kissler" would become the wife of Gilbert Frayle !

As a rule "Cecile Clare" put behind her all tremors and apprehensions concerning the result of an imminent confession, but to-night as she applied dabs of rouge above a smooth layer of "No. 1," and hung beads of black molten grease on the tips of long upcurling ashes, came a dozen speculations as to how Gilbert Frayle would receive the news that "Cecile Clare Kissler" was Anna Magda Merrick !

But speculation was more or less untinctured by the bitterness of alarm. An assurance had been given that although Gilbert loved a Girl-on-the-Stage he did not love her because she was a girl on the stage. He was not one of those men whose amorous mental

vision can only be fully illuminated by the flare of the footlights. He loved a musical comedy girl, but not because she was a musical comedy girl and convention demanded that he should take her to Romaneo's for supper.

He loved her—quite emphatically he had made this satisfying although somewhat hackneyed statement—because she was herself. And if he loved her because she was herself the fact of her having been born in an English county instead of in an American State wouldn't exercise any deterring effect upon his devotion.

Yes, things would be all right. The doors of the House of Chance had been opened, "Cecile Clare" had walked in, and the result would be a win all through.

It was curious, too, how little, yet how much, these last eight or nine months had changed her outlook upon life and things in general, for in spite of having retained all her own original characteristics, some of the other characteristics of make-believe had become so firmly imbedded in her nature and mannerisms that it would seem as if their eradication had now become a matter of impossibility.

Never would "Cecile Clare" be able to drop entirely the American drawl and the American twang which it had been more or less difficult to acquire. Never would she again regard Man and men except from the spoilt actress's standpoint of servitors and slaves. To think that she had ever feared men, waited for men, hoped for the approbation of man—either father or employer—seemed like a piece of psychological farce! Never again would she get out of the habit of expecting to have everything she wanted at all times

and in all places, and never again would the complete candour and ingenuous freshness of her nature be restored.

She would be always wondering if that person were worth while or if this person could serve any purpose. There was a certain acquired sense of irresponsibility and trusting-to-luck which had gradually become second nature ; and as for routine and punctuality and order—well, it seemed that never again would “Cecile Clare” be able to do anything because it was arranged that she should do it, or because there was any particular time settled for it to be done.

Nine months of being a Girl-on-the-Stage had undoubtedly quadrupled her personal charm, and unfortunately whenever a woman’s personal charm increases there is always a likelihood of her moral stamina being weakened.

Moral stamina is so largely a matter of not being called upon to resist.

But now, whatever other acquired characteristics might remain, love of the stage was not to be ranked among them, and as (on this particular evening when Artemus had been offered a post likely to afford more scope) “Cecile Clare” dressed, and faced the footlights, and sang her small songs, and danced her still smaller dances, she was spurred on by a make-believe enthusiasm which possesses no staying qualities whatsoever.

And Gilbert wasn’t in the theatre—another fact which caused “Cecile Clare” to long for the final fall of the final curtain, because since the Girl-on-the-Stage had fallen in love with her lover the stalls minus a certain dark moustache and a certain black tie presented

an aspect of empty blankness not conducive to the inspiration of dramatic art !

But of course Gilbert had been called away unexpectedly, and as he wasn't in the stalls he would be waiting at the stage door ; or if he wasn't waiting at the stage door he would be waiting at the flat.

Of course he would be waiting somewhere—"Cecile Clare's" stage training taught her that when a musical comedy girl has cowslip-yellow hair and blue eyes innocent with exactly the right brand of innocence a man is bound to be waiting somewhere !

They always wait !

Gilbert, however, wasn't at the stage door, and when "Cecile Clare" arrived at the Southwest flat it was to find Pauline, Colonel Raythe, and an "Express" letter instead of a prospective bridegroom.

But as the "Express" letter proved to be from the prospective bridegroom his absence was an omission which on this one occasion might be overlooked.

"Ah ! Hullo, Colonel !" cried "Cecile Clare," putting a pretty little note that was more tired than actually pathetic into her drawl. "You've jest come to ask me to choose my wedding present, haven't you now ? Isn't that right down dear of you ! "

Colonel Raythe, who had risen at her entry, now stood looking down at her with an expression on his face which could hardly be classified as jolly, optimistic, elder-brotherly, or paternal, and though his moustache and curls were silver his blue eyes seemed amazingly young.

"No, I've not come about wedding presents just at the moment. I came—well, I suppose, my dear,

I came to see you!" he replied, making an obvious effort at playing up to what might be either natural geniality or a persistent pose.

"Cecile Clare," who had been smiling at him, left off smiling—left off slowly—and walked to the mantelpiece.

"I wonder if you'll both excuse me if I read my li-lle letter while I drink my li-lle nightcap?" she said, taking up a tumbler of hot milk and putting her still painted red lips to the rim of the glass.

"Cecile Clare Kissler" drinking hot milk and with painted lips was a pretty sight.

"We'll excuse you, honey," answered Pauline. "We'll excuse anything so long as you don't kiss the envelope and plaster the letter over your heart!" she said, shooting towards Colonel Raythe a glance of friendly but diabolical amusement. It wasn't that she in the least resented his being in love with another woman instead of being in love with her—it was only that the whole situation appealed to her somewhat inhuman sense of humour.

"Cecile Clare" nodded as if she hadn't heard, but as if politeness made her want to appear as if she *had* heard, and tore open the envelope.

Then she read the letter within, and while she read some unconquerable magnetism drew the eyes of both Pauline Kray and George Raythe to her face.

They couldn't help watching her, they felt impelled to go on watching her—and as they watched they could see that her expression was changing, changing slowly, because her comprehension was not instantaneous.

Puzzled intentness—fear—complete realisation—tragedy !

Yes, the changing expressions ended in tragedy ; and the serious-eyed calmness of "Cecile Clare Kissler" was at an end.

"He's found out—he's found out just everything, and he's given me up !" she cried, speaking quite loudly and quite harshly for the first time in her life.

"What d'you mean, honey ?—tell us what you mean," demanded Pauline Kray, while Colonel Raythe stood quite still and automatically smoothed the palm of one hand on the back of the other.

"Yes, that's it—people always ask what other people mean ! There's nothing to do *except* to ask what they mean !" answered "Cecile Clare" wildly—all the more wildly and passionately and hysterically because but comparatively few emotions were, as a rule, allowed to ruck the surface. This was an outburst—everything that had been pent up must come out.

"What does Gilbert say ?" asked Pauline practically.

"S—ay ?" She repeated the word with the little drawl and the little twang which had grown to be part of herself. "He says just this—I'll read it, and you can both listen and see how a man writes when he means what he says. . . . 'Quite unexpectedly all the details of your deception have come to my knowledge. It is all sad and regrettable, but I am fortunate in having found out before it was too late. Please let matters rest as they are—without any reply to this letter, return of presents, or any such formalities. Good-bye. —Gilbert Frayle. . . . ' So he has found out !—he has found out ! And it *does* matter to him that

I'm a sham girl on the stage instead of being a real girl on the stage ! It does matter—it *does*—it—it—" "

It was a tremendous moment, and "Cecile Clare" gave way frankly and boisterously—as if she wanted to give way, as if she wanted to shame herself and humiliate herself and to show that she was no longer equipped with the weapons of pluck and resource.

A man had thrown her up !

Never had she known that her nature was capable of such depths of ferocity and primitive savagery as now, when a man had thrown her up !

In an abandonment of heartbroken fury she threw herself down upon the Chesterfield—that indispensable piece of furniture specially designed to meet emotional emergencies!—and once again sought refuge among all the rumpled, frilled, stuffed and flowered cushions.

She didn't mind any one seeing and knowing that she was sobbing, and that she had suddenly become incapable of exercising any emotional discipline over herself. She *wanted* to make a fool of herself—she *wanted* to give some vent to all the fury and disappointment and grief that were raging within her !

This was her real nature : it had been lying dormant all the time—all the time when she had remained mute and passive beneath the dreary round of an unsuitable business life—all the time when she had played at being a heartless, calm, equable little girl from Iowa !

She had been thrown up—thrown up just because she had entered by one of the doors of the House of Chance to find opportunity and a little more or less innocent deception waiting for her inside !

She had been thrown up because of a masquerade—

thrown up because she had played at being a girl on the stage——

“Cecile—my dear ! ” Some one was speaking. It was the Colonel—and when “Cecile Clare” looked up it was to find that Pauline Kray had left the room.

“Y-es ? —y-es ? ” she drawled mockingly, wildly, impatiently.

“Look here, my dear, don’t worry over this—it isn’t worth it ! Let—let me look after you ! ”

What did he mean ? What did the Colonel mean ?

“Cecile Clare” grew momentarily calm, because she was wondering and surprised.

“I—I—guess—I don’t quite understand ! ”

Then the smart cheery man with the square shoulders and silver hair and young blue eyes sat down and told her what he meant.

It was not marriage he meant—that, somehow, seemed vaguely impossible and quite outside the picture—but he wanted to “look after her”—he had plenty of money and a large heart, and he wanted to look after her.

She listened to him, then she got up and laughed quite dramatically and effectively—a laugh that was entirely out of keeping with her height, her figure, and the colour of her hair.

“I guess we’re playing up to the situation now ! —it’s all quite in order, isn’t it ? ” she cried, with childish, overdone recklessness.

“There’s no playing up to anything—Cecile, come here ! Cecile, you’ll have to do something—you’d better let me look after you, my dear ! You’ll be all right if I look after you and——”

But the protestations ended because there was no one to hear their fervour.

“Cecile Clare” had gone out of the room.

Yes, she had gone away—just in the beginning! But she would come back—George Raythe reckoned that she would come back.

There was nothing else for her to do.

CHAPTER V

EXCLUSIVE INFORMATION

LAWSON ROLT—as representative of the Manchester edition—was a mildly important person when the *Morning Cry* gave a many-coursed dinner to all the big men connected with the Pyramid Bridge extension scheme.

He had been on the reception committee, he had been allowed a word on the subject of the toasts and the speeches, and now, on the night of the dinner itself, he contrived to score here and there by means of that uncrushable audacity and push which has got more than one reporter into Debrett.

He had contrived to flatter the Chairman of the Board, for when champagne is plentiful and cigars are first-rate even chairmen of boards are open to flattery from newspaper men; he had managed to convey subtle pleasing little compliments to at least four of the directors, and now in a moment of half-mischiefous expansiveness it was his intention to say a few nice things to Sir Gilbert Frayle.

It would be amusing to encourage Sir Gilbert Frayle—amusing to give a metaphorical pat-on-the-back to a man who was keen on his (Lawson Rolt's) ex-best

girl, and who, perhaps, for all Lawson knew—and the newspaper man up in Manchester doesn't glean many of the latest London *on dits*) might be on the brink of marrying a young woman who wasn't the young woman she appeared to be !

Lawson stretched his thin lips and crinkled up the purple skin covering his thin nose. He felt both tickled and genial to-night—tickled at the idea of tackling Sir Gilbert Frayle, and genial because such a very liberal quantity of good champagne had passed down his throat during the last two hours and a half.

It was wonderful what a large amount of assurance could be built up on a dozen or so glasses of Heidsieck, Pommery, or Roger ! Lager and other beers caused Lawson to become expansive and talkative, but they did not have quite the same pleasant effect of making a man feel sure of himself, his manners, his clothes, his social position, and his own capacity for clear-headed judgment.

Lawson Rolt felt so very sure of everything to-night ; therefore, feeling sure, he decided to "have a bit of fun," and to tackle Gilbert Frayle directly any sort of opportunity presented itself.

And, as it so happened, the opportunity presented itself less than five minutes after the resolution was formed.

Dinner was over, most of the guests had risen, and preparatory to taking their departure were chatting in small groups.

First one group dissolved, then another, till for a moment Gilbert Frayle was left standing alone.

This was Lawson Rolt's opportunity, and he took it.

"If Literature may be permitted to congratulate Oratory I should like to express my appreciation of your very powerful speech, Sir Gilbert!" he said, after crossing the room with a queer rolling swagger that might at the first glance (not at the second) have passed for nautical *bonhomie*.

Sir Gilbert looked at him in surprise—as he might look at some unexpected insect which had alighted on his coat sleeve.

"Oh! yes—thanks!" he answered shortly—not so much the shortness of courtesy as of strained nerves and wandering thoughts.

But Lawson was stung. He wasn't going to be treated curtly by a man who was being made a fool of by his own ex-girl! Not he, indeed—not Lawson Rolt, the coming Power of the Press, the man who would "go far"!

"Yes, a very powerful speech," he repeated patronisingly, "and of all the more interest to me because of our having met before."

Gilbert Frayle only looked at him this time, and then made a preliminary movement suggestive of departure.

But Lawson checked the movement by a word.

"Miss Kissler—at least 'little Anna' as she always seems to me—introduced us at her flat, I believe. Or, if we were not actually introduced, we met," he said, speaking half jovially, half contemptuously, as a certain type of man does speak of a woman who has at some time or other delivered a direct blow to his vanity.

"Really? I don't remember it!" replied Sir

Gilbert, still more curtly, yet without following up the preliminary movement.

"Well, that's where I have the advantage of you ! Ha ! ha ! I happen to remember it very well, because the day I met you at Miss Cecile Clare Kissler's flat was the day that I found out that the public was being hoaxed, and that Miss Cecile Clare wasn't Miss C. C. K. at all ! I expect the fair Anna has been in a blue funk ever since, but so far I've played the game and haven't given her away. It's never playing the game to give a woman away, even if she is hoaxing the public, is it, Sir Gilbert ? "

"Obviously not. But—but—" (half unconsciously Sir Gilbert moved towards a corner near the mantelpiece—a secluded corner away from the other men, and where conversation could not be overheard) "—Er—what has this lady to whom you allude as 'Anna' to do with Miss Kissler ? "

Lawson grinned till the middle of his mouth almost reached the purple tip of his nose.

"What she's got to do with her just at the moment, Sir Gilbert, is that, at the present time, she *is* Cecile Clare Kissler and has been Cecile Clare Kissler ever since the end of last July or the beginning of August. Where the real starred and striped young dramatic genius is to be found I'm sure I can't say. All I know is, I lost sight of my little pal Anna Merrick at the end of last summer, and that when next I saw her it was at ooo, Southwest Street, where I went to interview Miss Cecile Clare Kissler for the 'Toplight' series running in the *Sceptre* ! Queer yarn, isn't it ? "

"And Anna Merrick—who is Anna Merrick ? "

asked Gilbert, putting the question almost as though it had been jerked automatically out of his mouth.

"Anna Merrick? Well, she's the daughter of the late Dr. Eustace Merrick, M.A., F.R.P.S.—Middleshire family, I dare say you know the name?"

"Of course—yes! yes?"

"Well, she was the philosophical doctor's daughter who, having acted for several years as papa's secretary, took up typewriting as a means of earning her living when she was left without any living having been earned for her! (That's the worst of philosophy, Sir Gilbert—so damned little money in it! ha! ha!) Yes—er—oh! yes, well, when I *first* met Anna Merrick she was employed as typist in the Publicity Department of the Automatic Change Delivery Company's Cornhill branch—and a nice, quiet, refined little girl she was. But when I *last* saw her—with her hair lightened two shades and her eyebrows darkened two shades—she was Miss Cecile Clare Kissler, of the Duke of Carmine's theatre! I must say the whole business is a puzzler for me, and if some one could only find out where the real starred and striped Cecile Clare has been hiding all this time, and what she's been doing, they'd get the grandest stage scoop of the year."

"Oh! yes—yes—I dare say they would!—I dare say they would!"

Lawson Rolt looked up in surprise. Not any of his perceptions—not even the journalistic ones—were specially acute just at the present moment, but even soothed as they were by the pleasant fumes of non-

teetotal drinks he was able to discern an unexpected note in Sir Gilbert Frayle's voice.

It almost seemed as if Sir Gilbert Frayle were shouting—it almost seemed as if Sir Gilbert Frayle were shouting hilariously !

But he couldn't be shouting, he couldn't be hilarious—unless, of course, that was his particular method of being affected by an abundance of non-teetotal beverages.

Lawson looked at him slyly with a brotherly gleam of sympathy in his eye.

" Damned funny stunt, isn't it?—make a good *feuilleton* called the 'Other Girl; or, Where was the Actress,' wouldn't it? " he said with a grin.

Sir Gilbert agreed that it would, and the surprising part of it was that when Sir Gilbert said " good-night " he shook hands.

Lawson couldn't quite understand the handshake, unless it was a silent method of expressing gratitude for having been told the truth about a cunning little minx before it was too late for the truth to be of any use.

Of course later on—in quite a limited number of years, in fact—anybody and everybody (from Socialistic orators down to mere princes, dukes, earls, and baronets) would be glad to shake the hand which, through the medium of a great halfpenny daily, a great penny weekly, and a great halfpenny evening paper, would regulate systematically all the international pulses of the world ; but just at present—before Lawson had even begun to go so far as he meant to go eventually—this unexpected offer of a hand-

shake from Sir Gilbert Frayle was almost as surprising as it was gratifying.

Lawson turned round. Now he had said so much he might prolong the conversation by saying a little more, and he might—oh ! there was quite a lot he might do if only Sir Gilbert hadn't gone away !

But Sir Gilbert had gone—without Lawson Rolt actually seeing when he did go.

Ah ! well, even though he had gone Lawson felt that quite a nice little load of stored-up revenge had been got off his chest. He had been too busy really to bother himself about paying off those old scores chalked up against Anna Merrick ; but now the opportunity had just come along—put itself in his way, as it were—there was a good deal of satisfaction to be gained by the thought that the young woman leading the make-believe life would get just as good as she had given.

Sir Gilbert had been keen on a stage-girl ; therefore there wasn't much doubt that when Sir Gilbert learned that the stage-girl wasn't the stage-girl on the stage—that—which—

Well, well, Lawson couldn't worry about it any more just now. There was a certain rotary movement going on inside his head that suggested prudent thoughts of bed.

He would go to bed—go home to the top-floor room in the Bloomsbury side street (not to that once-dreamed-of little flat with a yellow-haired sock-mending wife in perpetual attendance !)—and sleep—sleep and dream of the future, that amazing stupendous future which holds so much for common young men who mean to “ go far ! ”

CHAPTER VI

THE OTHER GIRL

A **SMALL** girl sat in a large green taxi.

She was a particularly lovely small girl, and she wore a straight little blue serge frock and a straight little blue serge coat, both cut by a master hand, and both decorated with an extraordinary number of tiny black buttons.

Her hat, although turning up at the side-front with a certain curve of cowboy swagger, was of the ultra obscuring variety, and swathed with a black lace veil which could be made to serve various purposes at various times. Her gloves (white kid and black stitched) must have cost half-a-guinea a pair, and for the price of her wonderful little buckled shoes at least half-a-dozen ordinary suburban feet could have been satisfactorily shod for three months.

In her hand she held the open score of "The Aeroplane Girl," and various crooning "*la-lala-la's*" and "*te-dedum-dums*" which from time to time escaped her lips it was easy to deduce that she was making strenuous efforts at getting some of the melodies firmly fixed in her mind.

But every now and then she paused and glanced

at the registering dial—glanced keenly and sharply, with the air of a person who never enjoyed spending more of her own money than it was absolutely necessary for her to spend.

At Charing Cross she had got in—now the question was would the “8” change to a “10” before she got out at Southwest Street?

She hoped not. It was so objectionable paying her own cab fares, besides being the most unnatural and extraordinary proceeding in the world!

“ She’s the girl from the aeroplane—
We know her again and again,
She’ll go through the stars, from Venus to Mars,
Aiding the snow and the rain.
She’s the girl with the petrol tank
She puts on such ‘ side ’ and such sw——”

But before the small girl in the blue serge costume could master either the words or melody of the sixth line of the opening chorus of the second act the taxi stopped just one instant after the eight had changed to a ten.

She alighted, she paid her shilling, she looked divinely petulant, and she passed into the gloomy cloister-like entrance to the flats.

A grey-moustached porter (who for the last fifteen years had been feigning deafness as a precaution against being required to answer a telephone) popped out of a dusky recess, touched his cap, and looked surprised.

“ Oh ! you’re back earlier than you expected, aren’t you, miss ? ” he said.

“ Wh-y, yes, I guess I am, Stonor.”

“ Well, I told a gentleman who was going up that

I didn't expect you back till five, so he says he'll call again.

"Oh! yes, that's right, Stonor—always let the gentlemen go on calling again!" was the drawled response, at which Stonor smiled with paternal leniency, while the small girl ascended a very few stairs and then stopped in front of a door.

The key, now—where was that little notched latch-key? Ah! here it was, right in the corner of that pretentiously and absurdly substantial-looking black velvet reticule!

And now to put the latch-key in the lock—now a jerk to the right, and now—*entrez*!

She entered—she shut the door—she looked round—she laughed to herself—then she passed into the bower-like drawing-room, where great pink roses sprawled over the cream ground of leaf-sprigged chintz.

"I guess it sort of feels like playing ghosts!" she murmured, addressing the reflection of a yellow-haired girl who faced her in the glass when she unpinned her big hat with the cow-boy curve in the front.

There, now that the hat was removed she felt better—more at home, and as she ought to feel except that a small headache resulting from weakness still hung heavily over her eyes.

With a swaggering little walk that was half dashing and half demure she went to the door and called.

"Say! Margot!"

There was a bustle from the distant regions of the kitchen.

"Ah! Miss Cecile Clare, I did not know you come in—I come——"

"No, no, don't you bother to come, Margot—just stay right where you are, only if you'll make me jest a li-lle oyster omelette and put it in the dining-room I'll be gl-ad!"

A cry, an exclamation from Margot in the kitchen.

"Ah! mees, ze first time you have ask for that! it makes me remember, mees—ze omelette is a souvenir!" she answered sentimentally.

"Ah! yes, Margot—well, I guess I'd better play up to the part a bit more, don't you see?" was the small, yellow-haired girl's reply, as she cooed a little laugh, and stepped across to the pink-and-white bedroom on the left.

But the room annoyed her—those fresh frocks hanging in the wardrobe were exquisite and too well-chosen; so she went back into the drawing-room and through into the dining-room just as the telephone bell rang.

"Hul-lo-oh!" she said, taking down the receiver and hiding it away under drooping puffs of cowslip-yellow hair.

"Hullo!" The response was anxious enough to sound business-like. "Is that you, Cecile?"

"Um-ah!"

"Well, you know who's speaking?"

"I guess I do-n't!"

"Yes, you do, my dear—Raythe!"

"Ah! yes! Hullo, Colonel!"

"Don't, my dear—for God's sake drop the Colonel—"

"All right, I'll keep it in my nut! Ha! ha! Ain't that dodge-y now?"

"Cecile!"

"Um-m?"

"Have you made up your mind, my dear? Are you going to let me look after you, and give you all you want and be proud of you and love you? Are you, Cecile Clare, are you, my dear?"

"Well, I guess you'd have a tough job doing that, wouldn't you? Besides, why should I want any looking after? ain't I cunning enough to look after myself?"

"My dear child, don't pretend with me—I haven't forgotten the other night! Cecile, make up your mind. In a few days you will be without a home, without an income, without a job, and without a lover—because, don't you rely on any help from Cecile Clare Kissler—"

"Why, isn't she a nice girl then?"

"Cute, my dear, and sharp as a stiletto—a vain, selfish little devil who never serves any ends but her own! No, C. C. K. won't be any good; Frayle—acting like a prig, coward, and cur—has given you up, and you can't keep on the stage when Cecile Clare is there herself. I'm the only alternative, my dear—come to me, darl—"

But before any more endearments could travel over the wires the small yellow-haired girl was enunciating a good many somewhat nasty sentiments.

"Then I guess, Colonel, if you're the only alternative it's one I won't be taking," she drawled. "Cecile Clare Kissler may be a vain, selfish li-lle devil (though I know for a fact she ain't!), but I'm a good, straight li-lle girl—the same as Cecile Clare was always straight, and I ain't going to be made into a crooked li-lle

girl jest because things don't run quite easy at the moment. So jest you please remember, and kindly don't you come shadowing around Southwest Street any more! Good afternoon, Colonel Raythe—and good-bye!"

"*Click!*" went the receiver back in its stand, then the small girl with the yellow hair turned round to find herself confronted by another girl who was a shade less small, and whose hair was almost the same tint as her own.

Blue eyes looked into blue eyes—two slow, half-serious smiles—then "Cecile Clare" greeted "Cecile Clare"!

"Hullo, my dear!—glad to meet you once again!" was what she drawled.

And with that remark ~~ended~~ the game of make-believe which Anna Merrick had been paid to play.

CHAPTER VII

THROUGH THE OPEN DOOR

" So you—you've come ba-ack ! " said Anna.

" Yes, I guess I've come ba-ack ! " answered Cecile Clare.

They both drawled, and the effect was humorous and stagy.

" And now, my dear, sit down and tell me how you've been getting along ! " was Cecile Clare's next remark when another moment of prolonged inspection was over.

They couldn't help looking at each other. There was an almost uncanny fascination in noting differences and making comparisons.

" Well, I've done my best, and I think you'll be able to slip back without any difficulty."

" You'll give me a good coaching up in the li-li-le part, won't you ? "

" Why—of course ! "

" And how's the Colonel, my dear ? "

Anna tried to stare with the same wide-eyed air of non-comprehension which had gone down so well during the last eight or nine months, but Cecile Clare dispersed the stare by a shower of words.

"I know about the Colonel, my dear, because he telephoned up jest before you came in, and, thinking it was you nosed on to the wire at the other end, he went on slanging C. C. K. and wanting to look after *you*, and to be a kind of horned-and-hoofed consolation, because some sort of a young man seems to have been busy breaking your heart and giving you up. However, I wrote up the end of the Colonel chapter, my dear, in *ver-y* red ink, so you won't have any more considerate li-ll-le proposals of that sort from *him*!! And now tell me about the young man."

Anna laughed—not very much of a laugh.

"The young man began because of you—and ended because of you," she answered plaintively.

"My! How was that now?"

Anna told her exhaustively and in detail, and, although taking an intelligent interest in other people's affairs was not one of Cecile Clare's hobbies, she listened with her yellow head held slightly on one side like a conscientious canary trying to pick up a tune.

"Yes, I wondered what was up when you got so good about the bracelet. I thought it must be a case of Cupid fluttering around somewhere. Us girls never want to give up diamonds unless we've got ourselves tied up with Cupid! . . . And so he's just not going to marry you because he's found out that you're *you* instead of *me*? My! he must be sort of a saint made out of the wrong plaster, and—all right, Margot, you jest hold tight and don't scream!"

But Margot—who had entered at the conclusion of the word "plaster"—couldn't hold particularly tight, because there wasn't anything handy to hold, while

the racial emotionalism of her nature made it impossible for a small *staccato* scream to be suppressed.

"Ah! la! la! Mademoiselle Cecile come back! What surprise! *That* mean the oyster omelette!" she cried.

"Yes, Margot, that's what the oyster omelette means, and I'll be jest ready to get outside it when Miss Merrick and I have run off the talking habit for a bit. Keep those oysters out of that omelette for another ten minutes or so, and then make one large enough for two! What Miss Merrick hasn't learnt about 'dreams in fairyland' she'd better learn right away—and—well, what is it, Margot?—what is it you want to sa-ay?"

Margot came farther into the room and whispered.

"It is Sir Gilbert Frayle who is here, and asks to see Miss Ki—ah! la! la! no!—to see Miss Mer-rick!" she murmured.

Anna said something and did something that was trivial and unimportant, but it was Cecile Clare who took the situation in hand.

"Ask Sir Gilbert Frayle to come right in!" was the order given by the mistress of the flat—and a moment later Sir Gilbert came right into the room which held the girl he loved and a replica.

Cecile Clare expected a great moment, and watched him with captivating mischief in her eyes. But she was disappointed, for the self-contained young man took the situation very much as he found it,—appearing, in fact, as if he had been fully prepared for the situation and—the replica!

He looked at Anna, he looked at Cecile Clare, then

with a slight ceremonious bow in the direction of the girl to whom he had sent a diamond bracelet he went straight across to the girl who had returned the same diamond bracelet.

"I—er—have ventured to come back because, through certain communications made by a person connected with newspapers, I have been enabled to understand things as they really are," he said, speaking neither particularly calmly nor particularly excitedly nor particularly quickly nor particularly slowly.

To be normal in abnormal circumstances is one very certain method by which a person can demonstrate the fact that he (or she) is not middle-class. Nothing requires such breeding and such self-control as to be normal.

"But I—I thought it was because you understood things as they really are—because you knew that I was pretending to be some one else whom I wasn't—that you wrote that letter!" answered Anna, vaguely and hopelessly.

"No, it was because—er—well, because of *Harleyshire* and—" At this point Sir Gilbert stopped and looked across antagonistically at the cowslip-haired Girl-on-the-Stage who in the first instance had been responsible for setting light to the smouldering fires of a young man's natural inclinations.

Cecile Clare smiled impudently and innocently, then picked up the ostentatiously dropped conversational thread.

"Say, if there's a lot of misunderstanding about Harleyshire going around I guess I'd better clear it up, and say whatever wants saying to make Sir Gilbert

Frayle and Miss Anna Merrick size up all about everything. I'll have to talk rather a lot, but if you listen right steadily all through it'll be over before the oyster omelette is ready. . . . Now, see here——" (at this point she sat down, and, crossing one foot over the other, showed both expensive shoe-buckles to the very best advantage). "I may as well tell you right away that coming over in the boat I did an uncommonly stupid thing—which was to fall in love with a young man! He was a nice young man, with wavy hair, and when his uncle dies I reckon the money part will be all right. But still I'd have been cuter if *I hadn't* fallen in love with his wavy hair, and hadn't promised to marry him without making any more fuss about it. But I *did* promise him, and I married him so very much on the quiet that not one li-lle person had any notion that the new girl at the Duke of Carmine's was really quite a matron with a wavy-haired husband hidden right away! Cute, wasn't it? . . . Well, we went on fine—having lovely week-ends together in Harleyshire and all around, and me getting on fine at the theatre and doing all God-mommer ever hoped I'd do, till one day I jest realised all in a hurry 'Cecile Clare' had got herself into a pretty tight corner. 'Cecile Clare' was going to have a li-lle baby!"

Here there was a dramatic pause of less than a moment, while Anna almost blushed and Gilbert looked more normal than usual. Then Cecile Clare went on.

"My! What a fix it was! If I left the stage for all those months just as I was beginning to go ahead the

management and the public would forget all about me and not take me back again—and Godmommer would rage—and it would be a freezing frost all round ! And it looked like as if I must leave, till I saw Miss Anna Merrick's portrait in a journal. That photograph was so much like my photograph that I asked Miss Anna Merrick to come right along to Normandy—where I was staying—to see if there was any hope that she could take on the little masquerade and play at being Cecile Clare Kissler from the fall to the summer. She came, she *did* take it on, and I guess the young men who thought I was a nice girl and who had sent me nice li-lle presents found her nicer than me ! *Ahem* !! Ah ! well, these things will happen when we get ourselves into tight corners and have to get ourselves out again ! . . . But now the rest about Harleyshire is that, until I went to Freshingsea about a week ago, I have been staying there, and just before my li-lle baby took the stage Miss Pauline Kray came along and stayed with me while Miss Anna Merrick, who had been ill (not with having a li-lle baby !) stopped at Trevillen in Cornwall. So you see I shall go back to the the-ayter with a big secret hidden away—the secret of a nice husband with wavy hair and a nice li-lle girl baby with the cunningest ways you ever saw ! I don't say I'll keep 'em hidden away for always, but they'll do fine where they are till I've done what Godmommer wished me to do ; then when I've got so big that it don't matter I can jest bring 'em along and have my photograph taken with the cunning li-lle girl baby and a Teddy bear ! See ? "

"I see—*we*—see," answered Gilbert, laying a half-involuntary and linking stress on the double pronoun. "And—er—Mrs. Norvedson," he went on, with a certain touch of quite likeable diffidence, "do—er—you think your daughter is likely to show any partiality for diamond bracelets when she is old enough to show a partiality for anything at all?"

"My! That's quaint your asking me that now, when only yesterday she went just crazed with gurgly joy because I showed her the cut-glass stopper of a scent bottle! I should just say that Cecilia's partiality for diamond bracelets would be *very* marked!"

"In that case will you allow me to present her with one which—er—happens to be lying by in my possession? One lady ~~has~~ already given it back, but if your daughter would do me the honour of keeping it my outraged feelings will be somewhat soothed!"

Cecile Clare laughed delightedly, but without disturbing the set of her lovely features; then she got up and swaggered towards the door.

"If you don't mind excusing me jest for a few minutes I'll go and see what that omelette is looking like, and I'll have a little chin-chin with Pauline. I know she likes No. 2 Cecile Clare better than No. 1 Cecile Clare, but I tell her she'll jest have to get over that right away. *Au re-vo-o-o-oir*—I guess I'll finish up that omelette right now!"

And then—exit Cecile Clare Kissler! Exit a little rose, bluebell, and cowslip girl with all her divine endowments of youth, loveliness, and temperament—that blessed world-taught temperament which causes some young and lovely women to take existence as

it comes and to extract all the sweetest flavour and juice from the Fruit of Life and to turn up all the clearest and best pages in the book of fate !

Exit—the very lovely yellow-haired actress from Iowa ! !

Gilbert Frayle waited a moment, then he crossed over and stood by Anna Merrick's side—stood reverently, tenderly, yet just a little aloofly, because wasn't she the good loved woman of his own class for whom he had been waiting ?—and good loved women of his own class must be handled gently.

“ The—er—wedding—may we keep to the original day, my darling ? ” he asked.

“ Wait one moment,” said Anna, “ —let me think.”

Should she resent having been doubted without proof ? Should she put matters off and see what happened ? Should she subject him to some further test ? Should she do anything—any riotous, rash, rebellious thing—instead of taking the very best that was in her reach to take ?

“ Five little white mice of Chance,
Shirts of wool and corduroy pants,
Gold and silver, copper and tin,
All for you if you let me come in—
Into the wonderful House of Chance. . . .”

The words were not audible, but she was actually repeating them to herself.

Once again the door of the House was open—the mouse was waiting—the little mouse was doing his best !

“ Yes—if you like—the same day ! ” she answered. And in the House of Chance there was a welcome

waiting for her—as there is for everyone who is brave enough to enter when the door is opened wide.

But there must be no delay—it is a door which closes again very quickly.

Go in while the door is open—go in—go “right in”!

THE END

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EXTRACT FROM PAGE 180.

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